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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

See you next year...

The Xbox 360 is out—and that was some launch. Easily the highest visibility the industry has ever seen—and the year is drawing to a close. All that's left on our agenda for 2005 is to complete our annual gameplay marathon to ready the annual Year in Review issue and then enjoy a few weeks of normal life before embarking on what will surely be the most exciting year in gaming history, and our busiest ever, as we scramble to keep up with the old while ushering in the new on top of the booming Mobile market.

Okay, so I say as much every year… but it's true. With Xbox 360 already making strides in not only co-op and online gameplay but community as well (on top of the obvious technological advancements) and the PS3 and Revolution yet to make their very distinct marks, we're headed for one seriously crowded year as the game industry takes that final step out of its niche status to full-blown national pastime. Can the marketplace support it? Are there enough gamers with enough money to make hits out of so many big-budget titles? Microsoft has built the bridge to worldwide wireless HD multi-media… but will they come? All this and more will be revealed in the years ahead. But before Regis belts out Happy New Year and we all start licking our respective chops, let us not forget that the PS2 is in peak form and not even close to done, and that the Xbox 360 has only just begun to show us its true power, along with the PSP… Confused? Bewildered? Broke? Ain't gaming great!

So Happy holiday's from everyone at Play. We'll see you next year with a new focus, a new and extremely improved website, and maybe even a new look. In the meantime, if you'd like to chime in on your game of the year pick, you know where to find me.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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1) Use them as a ladder 2) Be your wingmen 3) Clean your room 4) Screen your calls 5) Wash your car

50 uses for your

6) Play it while you're waiting for [illegible]bus 7) Play [illegible]o games 8) Fe[illegible]u grapes 9) Walk [illegible]dog 10) Help you save the planet

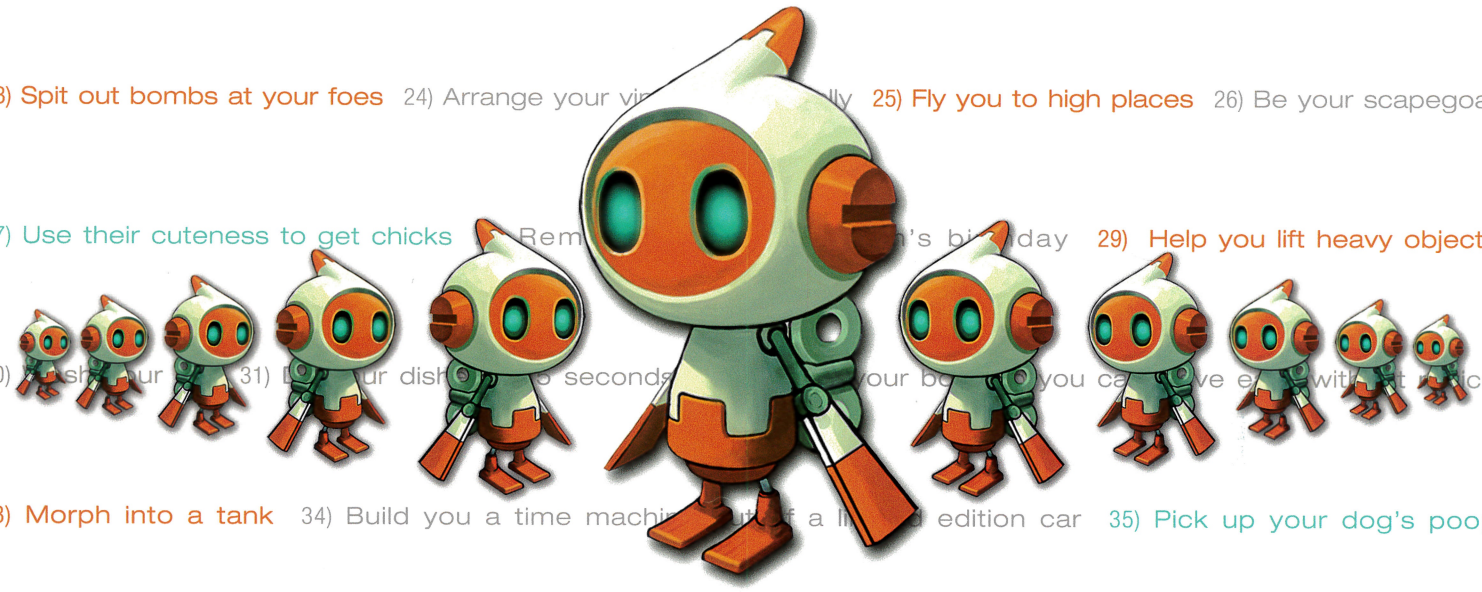
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11) Watch the big game with you [illegible] 14) Give you change for a dollar

15) Get you into the hottest clubs 16) Exercise for you 17) Watch scary movies with you 18) Turn into a train

19) Jump into a mosh-pit with you 20) Help you when you're lost 21) Bake you brownies 22) Take out the trash

23) Spit out bombs at your foes 24) Arrange your vi[illegible]lly 25) Fly you to high places 26) Be your scapegoat



27) Use their cuteness to get chicks [illegible]Rem[illegible]'s bi[illegible]day 29) Help you lift heavy objects

30) [illegible]ur [illegible] 31) [illegible]ur dish[illegible] seconds [illegible]your b[illegible] you ca[illegible]ve e[illegible]with[illegible]t [illegible]ice

33) Morph into a tank 34) Build you a time machi[illegible]t[illegible]f a li[illegible] edition car 35) Pick up your dog's poop

36) Tuck you in at night 37) Scrub your toilet 38) Play it over and over and over 39) Do your laundry 40) Order you a pizza

What will you do with yours?

41) Be your samurai warrior 42) Protect you from evil 43) Win you prizes at the carnival 44) Burn your CD collection to your PC







45) Re[illegible]u m[illegible]intr[illegible]ovies

49) Recharge your spare PSP™ battery 50) Be your best friends

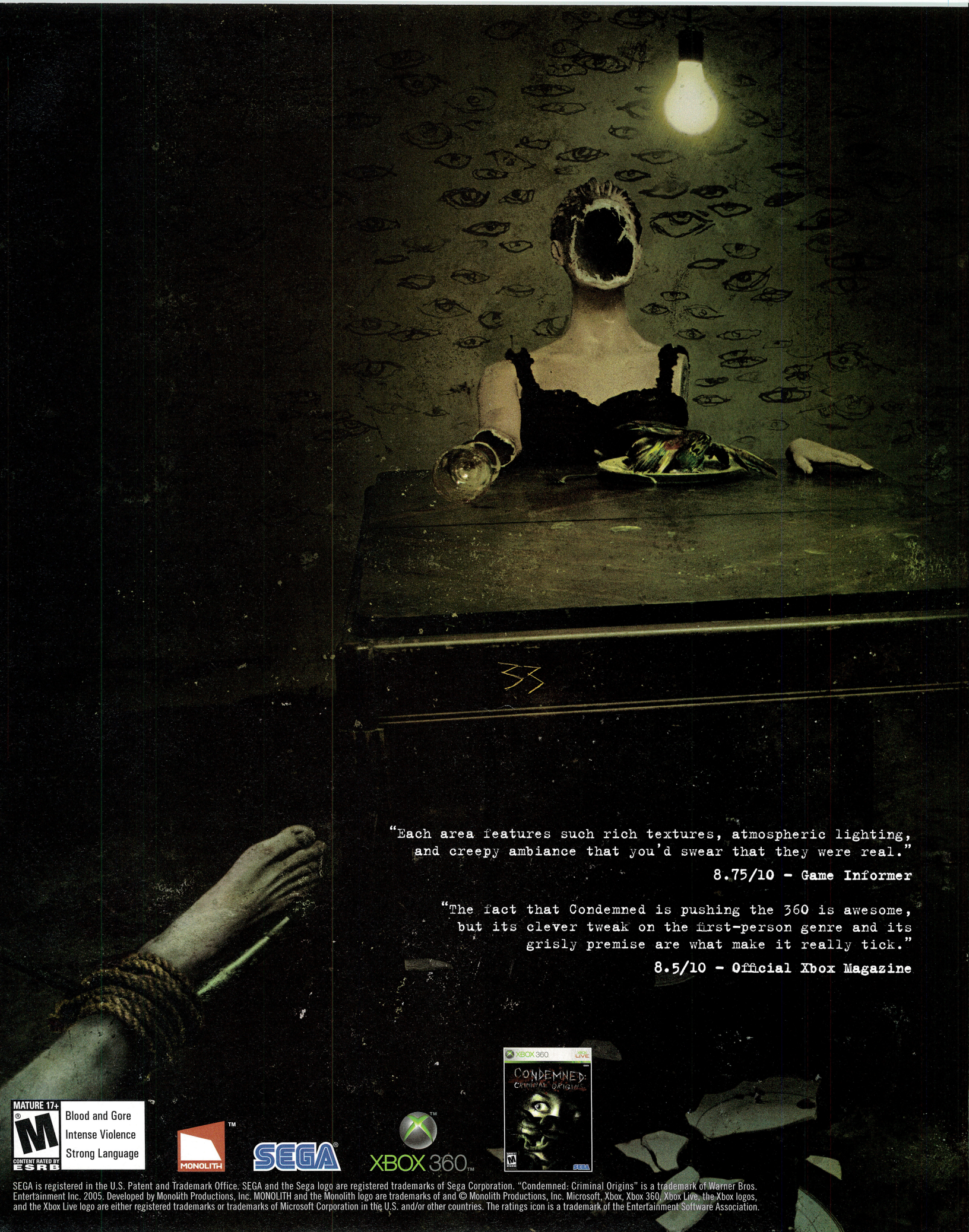
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PlayStation Portable

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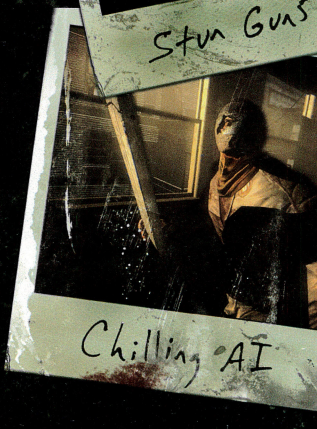
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playback

January 2006

letters@playmagazine.com



LETTER OF THE MONTH

It says so on that bloody lable

Please be warned before reading I'm about to go on a rant.
I want to voice my opinion on what has been happening to games, as a whole, as it has become a mainstream activity. Lets start with something recent like oh, I don't know, censorship in games, specifically content deemed "adult." I'm sick and tired of hearing from people about how games are destroying our youth; firstly, the term youth has been used in such a way as to make it appear that the gaming companies have been force-feeding people (specifically children) violent and somewhat sexual content because they are evil money grubbers. While they may be money grubbers (they are running a business) they are not force-feeding us anything we don't want. Fact is the content they're complaining about is marketed and intended for, and I can't stress this enough, ADULTS; it says it on the bloody label.
Secondly, they continually talk about how haphazard the rating system is, and it isn't, it has more than clear guidelines, I think. I mean, how much clearer does it need to be: E is for everyone, T is for teen(13+), M is for mature (17+), and Ao is for adults only (18+). That big M stands for mature, not meant for kids.
The quest against games has become overridden by parents complaining because they can't say no to their kids. This is however, no surprise as people do this every time something new comes out: look at music, for example, or movies. New things get blamed for societies social failings because it's easier to blame them than admit they should be paying more attention to their kids instead of leaving it to your TVs, or what those little letters in the lower corner of the box mean. Oh yeah, and is it just me or have they done nothing but throw stones as opposed to doing something constructive about it?
Ok, now that I'm done with the people outside of the industry, let's talk about those inside it. What's with all this bull about wanting a good gaming experience for me the consumer? Did i complain about the service I was getting before Sony? No, I didn't, nor, I think, did anyone else, but none the less, here comes the new age of gaming, all bright shiny and dumbed down so that the mass market can more easily obtain their share of the profit margin. Now don't get me wrong: there are things I enjoy about being a large enough community to warrant corporate attention, but I'm not willing to sacrifice my hard earned cash for a game that came out half done or is just another cookie cutter. Just because it takes longer doesn't mean people won't play it; if anything we'll play it more. Does the word anticipation mean anything to you? Oh, and I'm talking to MS and Sony, not the big N. I'll deal with them in a sec. Come on guys, you need to be paying attention to the people who will still be here in their 30s, 40s and 50s. I'm only 19 and I can still see myself playing the newest Crash Bandicoot when I'm 90. Please don't rob gaming of the one thing we all prize it for: its originality and its ability to take us somewhere where we can throw fire balls from our noses or be a blue robot saving the earth form a mad doctor. (Oh, and Sony, please, we need more PSP games)
Now we come lastly to my one refuge of hope, Nintendo. Say what you will about their third party support and the fact that they rarely deliver on time (when have you ever not been willing to wait?) but they do deliver good original content consistently, if not so promptly. Nintendo, you need to get your act together and pick up where my beloved Sega left off, give those of us who have been here since the beginning what we want. That is, simply, more games. Is that so much to ask?
I mean, I bought a Gamecube when my brother left to replace his, when I could have just as easily have bought a replacement PS2. We will support you Nintendo; stop waiting for a time to strike and do it with your new system now! Take a spot at the top before you, as all the other original companies before you did, vanish.
I think that about covers it. On one last note: Play, I find your magazine a rare ray of hope in an otherwise dark gaming world. Keep up the great work and don't stop for anyone.

Andrew RW

All he wants is what he wants

I'm tired of the new, trendy cliché accusing Nintendo of "telling us what we want," this time regarding the new controller. In the 80s they told us what we wanted with the NES, reviving the industry. They told us we wanted an analog controller, which has become standard. Other companies have done the same. Atari told us we want home systems. Sega told us we want online games. Sony said we want polygons and 3D gaming. Each company forms an idea they feel will innovate gaming and make money. Sometimes it's with the best intentions, though they may fail. But things become a disaster when the same thing is churned out to give us what we want. This caused the crash in the early 80s. So, I hope everyone will continue to tell me what I want. Because that's where true artistic expression and great games comes from.

Erin H

Evan's Show

Three cheers to you guys for including Evan Show's website in your latest issue. There are skillions of great websites and artbooks out there which are dedicated to anime or video games; a new section in your magazine for these things would be greatly appreciated.

-Ben M

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ink

news | trends | gossip | assorted nonsense

COUNTDOWN TO ZERO HOUR

Area 52

To the general gaming populace, Palmdale, California seems to be little more than a blip on the radar. But for two days in November, the small desert community was turned into a haven for gamers around the world as Microsoft fired off the opening salvo in the next-gen console wars. And while launch parties are nothing new to the industry, Microsoft made sure that the "Zero Hour" launch of its Xbox 360 console offered up something a little different.

For the official launch of the Xbox 360, Microsoft took over an aircraft hangar in the middle of the Mojave Desert, decked it out with music, lots of fluorescent green lighting, bean bags, and over five-hundred 360 consoles complete with high-definition monitors. Then the company opened the doors, not to the celebrities usually associated with an event like this, but to its core market … the gamers. For thirty hours, Microsoft played host to over a thousand gamers from around the world. There was food. There were drinks. And there was even entertainment in the form of a Kaiju Big Battel, the quirky lovechild of WWE wrestling and Power Rangers.

But for most people, it was all about the games. Publishers not only showcased all of their launch titles at Zero Hour, but many also threw in a few surprises, such as playable previews of Ninety-Nine Nights from Q Entertainment and Dead Rising from Capcom. Square-Enix had a playable build of Final Fantasy XI running on the Xbox 360. And Epic Games showed off even more of its highly anticipated 360 shooter, Gears of War.

The event wrapped up with a concert from UK rockers Louis XIV, after which a ticker counted down the last 360 seconds before the official launch. The hangar doors swung wide once again as three Best Buy trucks made their way through the crowds, complete with police escorts. Once the clock hit zero, the trucks opened up, revealing thousands of Xbox 360 Premium units. And with that, the next generation of video gaming officially began. David Chapman



SPIKE TV AWARDS

On the path to righteousness

For all the haters out there spiteful of the Spike TV Video Game Awards 2005 and their mainstream push and the marketing blitzkrieg that drives them, listen up: Resident Evil 4 and God of War got their awards, and that's respect. This third installment of Spike's shoutout to games and the awesome talent behind them actually came off pretty well, boasting some well-deserved winners and host Samuel L Jackson firing off a barrage of sharp jokes. Some of the best best moments—like when he jumped into his Pulp Fiction routine—were left for the live audience to enjoy, but overall, props to the show for at least giving games a night they deserve. The list of winners is as follows:



GAME OF THE YEAR
Resident Evil 4 (Capcom)
BEST ACTION GAME
God of War (Sony Computer Entertainment America)
BEST INDIVIDUAL SPORTS GAME
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland (Activision, Inc.)
BEST TEAM SPORTS GAME
Madden NFL 06 (Electronic Arts)
CYBER VIXEN OF THE YEAR
Maria Menounos as Eva in James Bond 007: From Russia With Love (Electronic Arts)
BEST GAME BASED ON A MOVIE
Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie (Ubisoft)
BEST PERFORMANCE BY A HUMAN MALE
Jack Black in Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie (Ubisoft)
BEST SUPPORTING MALE PERFORMANCE
Christopher Walken in True Crime(TM): New York City (Activision, Inc.)
BEST PERFORMANCE BY A HUMAN FEMALE
Charlize Theron in Aeon Flux (Majesco Entertainment)
BEST SUPPORTING FEMALE PERFORMANCE
Traci Lords in True Crime(TM): New York City (Activision, Inc.)
BEST CAST
Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie (Ubisoft)
BEST ORIGINAL SONG
"Maybe We Crazy" by 50 Cent in 50 Cent: Bulletproof (Vivendi Universal Games)
BEST SOUNDTRACK
Guitar Hero (RedOctane)
BEST ORIGINAL SCORE
We Love Katamari(TM) (Namco Hometek Inc.)
DESIGNER OF THE YEAR
David Jaffe for God of War (Sony Computer Entertainment America)
PONTIAC BEST DRIVING GAME AWARD (Viewer's Choice)
Burnout Revenge (Electronic Arts)
MOST ADDICTIVE GAME FUELED BY DEW (Viewer's Choice)
World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment)
BEST WIRELESS GAME (Viewer's Choice)
Marc Ecko's Getting Up (Atari, Inc. & Glu)
BEST FIGHTING GAME
EA Sports Fight Night Round 2 (Electronic Arts)
BEST FIRST PERSON ACTION
F.E.A.R. (Vivendi Universal Games)
BEST MILITARY GAME
Call of Duty 2 (Activision, Inc.)
BEST GRAPHICS
Resident Evil 4 (Capcom)
BEST HANDHELD GAME
Lumines (Ubisoft)
BEST MULTI-PLAYER GAME
World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment)
BEST BREAKTHROUGH TECHNOLOGY
Sony PSP (Sony Computer Entertainment America)
BEST PC GAME
World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment)
BEST RPG
World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment)

LIGHTS, KAMEO, ACTION!

Kameo gets a movie deal...of the animated kind.



Ever wonder if maybe the problem with video game movies is that they're live action—and therefore more about the stars and "key" demographics than staying true to the material? If so, this should come as a refreshing bit of news: Microsoft and Maxmedia have announced that the Santa Monica, California-based production company (a global film producer and distributor working with such renowned filmmakers as Katsuhiro Otomo) will produce a feature animated adaptation of Rare's Kameo: Elements of Power with Sunmin Park on board to adapt it to the big screen and direct. Park recently produced, co-wrote and directed the English version of "Sky Blue," (a multilayered, composite, digital animation feature in high definition) having previously produced "The Others," starring Nicole Kidman, and Chen Kaige's "The Emperor and the Assassin," starring Gong Li. Production for the animated adaptation will begin in 2006.

SILENT HILL MOVIE POSTER CONTEST

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TRI STAR



Beginning Dec. 5th, aspiring artists can download assets from the Silent Hill website (WelcomeToSilentHill.com) and create their poster. Entries must be submitted via the site by 1/3/06 as all valid entries will be posted to the site for voting starting 1/4/06.

There are two rounds of public voting based on popularity: In the first round, valid entrants will receive an email and a text blast. Each provides either their unique online or WAP site link to be used to drive friends to their official poster entry vote tabulation pages. Entrants forward the links either by email and/or by text to friends encouraging them to vote in support of their poster. Votes will be tabulated combining both online votes and WAP site votes to determine the 50 most popular posters.

The 50 posters with the highest number of votes by 1/18/06 at noon will be considered for final selection by Screen Gems. From 1/23 through 2/1, mobile and online voting will resume for only the five finalists, chosen by Screen Gems from the 50 most popular images.

On 2/2, Screen Gems will announce the winner selected from the five finalists by popular vote. The winning poster will be reproduced for display in theaters across the country prior to Silent Hill's theatrical release on 4/21/06. Good luck!!

SPINNING 360

Microsoft launches new console, creates market frenzy

Fans lined up in the cold and waited for hours for the prize: a brand-new Microsoft Xbox 360. The 360, which launched on November 22 in North America and with 18 games, quickly sold out, leaving many to scramble to find the product.

As of press time, no official sales figures for the Xbox 360's launch have been released. However, CNN.com recently quoted Microsoft's Chief Financial Officer Bryan Lee as saying the company planned to sell 2.75 million to 3 million Xbox 360s by February 2006, a figure that some have called conservative.

A clearer picture of the launch came from Robbie Bach, president of Microsoft's entertainment and devices division. "We are well aware that many gamers are disappointed to have not gotten their Xbox 360 on day one," he said in a press release. We are working around the clock to manufacture as many Xbox 360s as we can and are replenishing our retail channel week after week."

In the meantime, sales of Xbox 360 soared on internet auction site ebay.com. More than 1,800 Xbox 360s were sold on the site, Ebay reported, in the first 12 hours after the console's launch. The site released a statement reporting the new Xboxes were selling for an average of $660.



As the reports of shortages for the new console increased, Microsoft's damage control quickly kicked in. News site MSNBC.com wrote, "Microsoft and retailers had warned consumers of the limited supply ahead of the launch, but denied there were production problems or that the supply had been artificially kept tight as a marketing stunt. Before the launch, Microsoft said that fewer consoles were available initially in North America because of its plan to launch the console worldwide within a few weeks, instead of months." Microsoft launched the Xbox 360 in Europe on December 2 and in Japan on December 10.

Reports of the new Xboxes malfunctioning quickly filtered in, but it remains to be seen how many of these are hyperbolic and how many are genuine. Most of the complaints centered on overheating with the console and its massive, bricklike power supply plug. Microsoft responded to these with the following statement, "We've received a few isolated reports of consoles not working as expected," spokeswoman Molly O'Donnell told Reuters news service.

"The call rate is well below what you'd expect for a consumer electronics product of this complexity," she said. "As a percentage of the total number of Xbox 360 systems already in the field, these calls represent a very small fraction. That being said, there is no systemic issue with Xbox 360. Each incident is unique and these customer inquires are being handled on a case-by-case basis." O'Donnell recommended anyone having problems with the 360 call Microsoft's support number at 1-800-4MY-XBOX.

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City** rockstar / psp
02	**Star Wars Battlefront 2** lucasarts / ps2, xb
03	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / ps2,
04	**The Warriors** rockstar / ps2, xb
05	**50 Cent Bullet Proof** universal / ps2, xb,
06	**Soul Calibur 3** namco / ps2
07	**FIFA 06** ea / psp
08	**Matrix: Path of Neo** atari / xb, ps2
09	**NBA 2K6** 2k sports / ps2, xb, xb 360
10	**NBA Live 2006** ea / xb, ps2



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Sept. Game Sales

01	**Madden NFL 06** ea / ps2
02	**NBA Live 06** ea / ps2
03	**Mario Superstar Baseball** nintendo / gc
04	**Madden NFL 06** ea / xb
05	**Tom Clancys Rainbow Six: Lockdown** ubi / xb
06	**NASCAR 06 Total Team Control** ea / ps2
07	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06** ea / ps2
08	**WWE Day of Reckoning** thq / gc
09	**Nintendogs Chihuahua** nintendo / ds
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Top 5 Now Playing and Reader Selections

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Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** nintendo / gc
02	**Final Fantasy XII** square enix / ps2
03	**Kingdom Hearts II** square enix / ps2
04	**Gears of War** microsoft / xbox 360
05	**Metal Gear Solid 4** konami / ps3



Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / xbox 360
02	**Tokobot** tecmo / psp
03	**Condemned: Criminal Origins** sega / xbox 360
04	**Peter Jackson's King Kong** ubisoft / xbox 360
05	**Sonic Riders** sega / xbox



Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Half Life 2** valve / xb
02	**Peter Jackson's King Kong** ubisoft / xbox 360
03	**Mario Kart DS** nintendo / ds
04	**Call of Duty 2** activision / xbox 360
05	**Mario Baseball** nintendo / gc



Greg Orlando editor extraordinaire

01	**Fable: the Lost Chapters** microsoft / xb
02	**Call of Duty 2** activision / xbox 360
03	**Shattered Union** 2k games / xbox
04	**Animal Crossing** nintendo / ds
05	**Grand Theft Auto** rockstar / psp

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Conker: Live and Reloaded** microsoft / xb
02	**Meteos** nintendo / ds
03	**Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst** sega / pc
04	**Kirby: Canvas Curse** nintendo / ds
05	**Metal Gear Ac!d** konami / psp

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**Dead or Alive 4** tecmo / xbox 360
02	**Gundam SEED: Rengou vs. Z.A.F.T.** bandai / ps2
03	**Densha de Go! Pocket: Yamate-Sen Hen** taito / psp
04	**Shadow of the Colossus** sony / ps2
05	**Mario Kart DS** nintendo / ds

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TALES OF LEGENDIA

Namco's fifth and finest Tale rides in on the tail-end of the PS2's mighty reign

words Dave Halverson

Over its impressive six-year reign as the king of all consoles, the PS2 has had its share of RPGs—for better and for worse—but in its twilight, the spigot has been turned on full and the handle broken off. Between Q4 2005 and Q1 2006 a consortium of the best tale weavers in the business are sending us on our way with an unheard of seven first-rate RPGs, where under normal circumstances we're lucky to see three in a year. And while I highly doubt this insurgence was orchestrated, what better way to stave off those early (and expensive) cravings for the dawn of the next-generation? While Xbox 360 owners sift through the initial next-gen pile picking out the few games worthy of carrying the moniker, future PS3 owners will be reveling in the twilight of their PS2s and chuckling under their breath. By the time 3rd parties figure out how to bring us normal mapped games sans loading that

run at 60 fps, the PS3 will have been long out and on its way to world domination part 3, riding on a launch made up entirely of next-gen software without a retrofitted last-gen title in sight. Until such a time, might I suggest Namco's new RPG hybrid, Tales of Legendia, as a tasty appetizer.

Like any RPG worth its salt, Legendia is defined by the sum of its parts, divided between story and events, item management and commerce, visuals and sound (and such sweet sound it is) and of course its battle system. With so many RPGs vying for those last few PS2 dollars, Namco sought to make theirs stick out like a troll at an elves' convention and so they've reached deep into their bag of tricks to present something truly original, while sticking to the genre's time-honored covenants and their decidedly storybook-meets-manga design etiquette. The end result is a combination of sterling anime presentation on both the hand-drawn and polygonal sides of the equation, real-time 2D tactical fighting with all the RPG trappings, and a deep twisting story that transpires by way of deftly spoken dialogue seamlessly woven into every facet of the game, down to the impromptu after-battle celebrations.

Although you ultimately choose formation and who to control as the leader of your party, this fifth game in the Tales of series revolves around the spiky white-coifed Senel Coolidge: Alliance Marine, iron "eres" user (eres being the game's resident magic) and all around wise guy, and his vulnerable-to-a-fault sister Shirley, whom we meet on the run and under attack amid turbulent seas, just as fate intervenes in the form of a massive maritime continent/kingdom in transition, the Legacy. Set adrift after losing their leader or "Merines" who once guided the ancient land mass by the power of his will, the people have been awaiting the arrival of a successor ever since; prophesied to appear under a pillar of light…just like the one that drew Senel and Shirley onto its pristine shoreline. No sooner than Shirley is revived in a fresh water spring (sea water to her is that of sunlight to a vampire) she is quickly kidnapped, setting in motion a chain of events that forces headstrong Senel into a cooperative posture, mounting his rescue as word of her miraculous arrival spreads throughout the land, to factions both good and evil… Where there is the promise of prosperity and light there must also be a black-hearted megalomaniac, and Legendia delivers the maximum dosage via one Vaclav Bolud. Deep within the core of the Legacy lies the key to its navigation and an omnipotent weapon of Bruckheimer proportions—and Vaclav is prepared to do whatever it takes to become Captain, including, but not limited to, summoning The Terrors: three deliciously nasty minions (Fire eres Melanie, Cashel the Phantom, and Stingle the Vicious, master of the sword) so patently callous you almost wish they'd win (I just love a good evil faction). And so the race to find Shirley is on. The people want her as their queen, Vaclav wants to use her as a human uplink, and Senel just wants to get his sister (or is she?) and get the hell out of there. If only it were that simple.



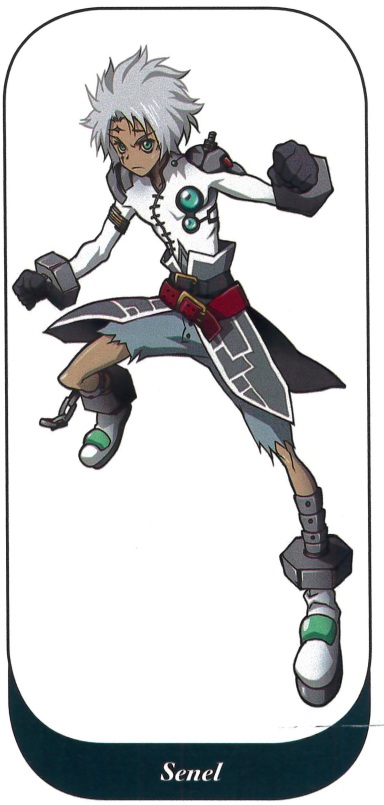


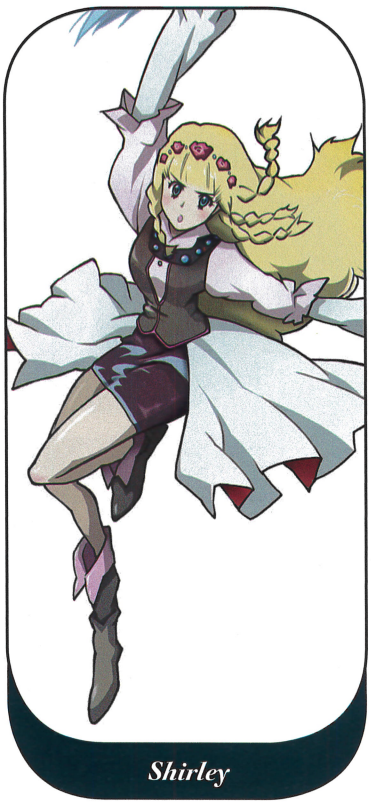
"The piece de resistance however is the new X-LiMBS battle system which utilizes technology from the Soul Calibur series..."

Rather than send us into this great role-playing abyss with yet another token band, Melfes (see inset) present us with a fractured group of bickering warriors, each with their own agenda. The would-be leader of the expedition—level headed Sheriff Will Raynard (the first person to befriend Senel and soon after toss him in jail) makes a bid for the good guy role, but enough skeletons come rolling out of this guy's closet to fill a mausoleum. No one can be trusted—most of all the spirited women of the group. Chloe Valens has a femur-size bone to pick with Vaclav, and treasure hunter Norma



MelFes
They really now how to tell a Tale.





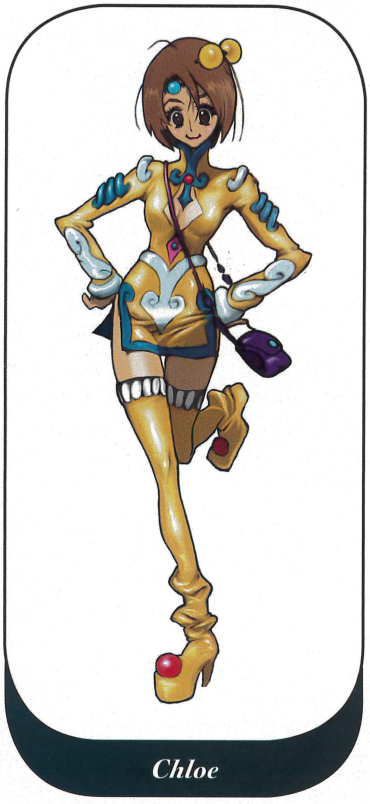
Characters



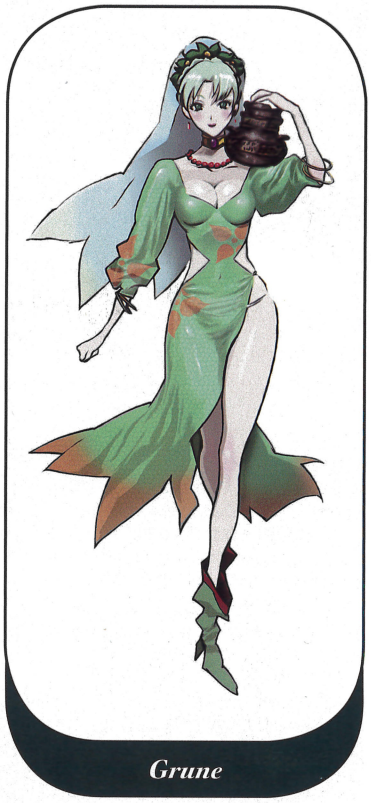
Will



Norma



Chloe



Grune





Beatty's half-wittedness is only outweighed by her greed. Not to mention Jay, Moses, and Grune who join up after the game's first cataclysmic event. Legendia may look distinctly SD (super deformed, a.k.a. cute) but the dialogue and situations border on mature, dotted with intelligent dialogue, insatiable villains, and more than its share of plot twists further defining it as a unique bit of RPG craftsmanship.

The piece de resistance however is the new X-LiMBS battle system which utilizes technology from the Soul Calibur series to present panning and zooming real-time 2D combat that combines fighting game movement with traditional role playing tactics. There's nothing quite like it and it never gets old, thwarting repetition by becoming decidedly more tactical as the game progresses, depending on who is in your party (you can choose up to 4 characters to take into battle) and how you choose to coordinate variables such as distance, TP (magic) usage, balance offense and defense, and even designate who fights with you and who takes on any surrounding assailants (I recommend keeping Chloe by your side). You can also assign two party members special attacks to the shoulder buttons for on the fly healing or assistance during battle. Initially the system seems one-sided and fairly skewed in the player's favor, however, as the plot thickens so do the enemies, and especially the bosses, many of which will tax both your reflexes and your management skills to their utmost capacity, unless you decide to set the stage and then set the battles on auto. Either way, the battles are absolutely spectacular to behold, displaying numerous highly detailed monsters on screen along with an almost blinding array of pyrotechnics with nary a trace of frame rate loss of any kind.

The game looks stunning across the boards, resembling a beautiful painting, but the models on both sides during battle are especially praiseworthy. While I'm now completely spoiled by normal mapping, storybook visuals of this nature will never go out of style. There's not a visible seam or hiccup to be found in Legendia. Transitions from soil to grass and so on are as they would appear in nature (which is more than I can say for many a 360 game) and the characters, although SD, are amazingly detailed and layered. This is Japanese





Senel entering Werites Beacon after a hard day fighting in the fields.

game creation at its very finest. At no time during Legendia did I find myself wishing it was next-gen…imagining maybe, but not wishing.

Outside of the battles things are more conventional (although no less exceptional) with the gameplay divided between fields (large sprawling areas used to navigate between levels) punctuated by "ducts" used for warping to previous destinations, and Puzzle Booths—rooms that link wormholes where Senel must push and pull blocks and light crystal beacons to pass. The main city, Werites Beacon, is another point of interest where, besides being painstakingly detailed, you can partake in any number of services such as purchasing weapons, armor, and various elixirs, or even do a little cooking. All hail the glory of the Japanese RPG. Among all of the drama, with the fate of a world teetering in the balance, only the Japanese would have us bake. Legendia has an exhausting amount of potions and elixirs available to bolster attributes, top off your TP, revive fallen party members and boost HP, but the only way to heal the entire group is to feed them. And so periodically throughout the game (keep an eye out for the loopy Mimi) you will discover recipes for such delicacies as Toast, Toast and Jam, Hot Dogs, Hamburgers, and other nutritious foods. Then once you have the recipe you can purchase the ingredients and whip up snacks for the troops at the local bakery. As off the wall as that may sound, wait until you meet the Bantam Bouncers. Any RPG bold enough to bust out an impromptu Vegas-style musical number in the town square deserves your full attention.

Tales of Legendia
PlayStation 2
9.0 Score

Legendia's the whole package: gorgeous fields and locales, epic soundtrack, masterful character design, and a fresh, innova-

I'm on the fence about the whole baking dynamic and it could do with more animated sequences even though what's

Developer: Namco Limited **Publisher:** Namco Hometek Inc. **Online:** None **Available:** February 2006

Interview Jun Toyoda

Jun Toyoda Joined Namco in 1990 and has since worked on all five Tales of games, Co-Producing Tales of Phantasia (Super Nintendo), directing the setting on Tales of Destiny (PlayStation), original concept, setting, and NPC messaging on Tales of Eternia, Director on Tales of Fandom (PlayStation), and now Producer on Tales of Legendia, the most ambitious game in the series thus far…



play: X-LiMBS is certainly one of the most innovative and refreshing battle systems we've seen in a long time. How did the idea to incorporate fighting-like battles into an RPG come about?
Jun Toyoda: In the last 10 years, the Tales series has been utilizing a fighting-game style battle system, while working separately from the Tekken team and Soul Calibur team. With the new MelFes project being established and by bringing together members who worked on the Tales series, as well as the Tekken and Soulcalibur series, we were able to create a product incorporating the plot of an RPG with the feel-good action found in a fighting game.

Would you suggest purely manual battle settings to fully reap its benefits?
The move where you sneak up on your enemies for a back attack, also known as Pass Through, is easier when using the manual setting. If you're able to use Pass Through successfully, it could be a huge advantage, but you also have to watch your enemy carefully and execute the move at just the right time. You also need to be aware because if your timing is off, your enemy could block the move and you may end up receiving the damage in

the end.

What technology specifically does Legendia borrow from the Soul Calibur series?
It was mainly the character motion technology. Since the characters responded instantaneously to the player's controls, we did not use motion capture in most of the battle modes in order to achieve those powerful motions we were aiming for. We were able to come up with some stunning motion data thanks to the experience and knowledge of Yosuke Kadowaki, who was responsible for the superb motion from Soul Calibur 2. This is definitely something you must experience firsthand. We would love to have you pick up a copy and play it for yourself.

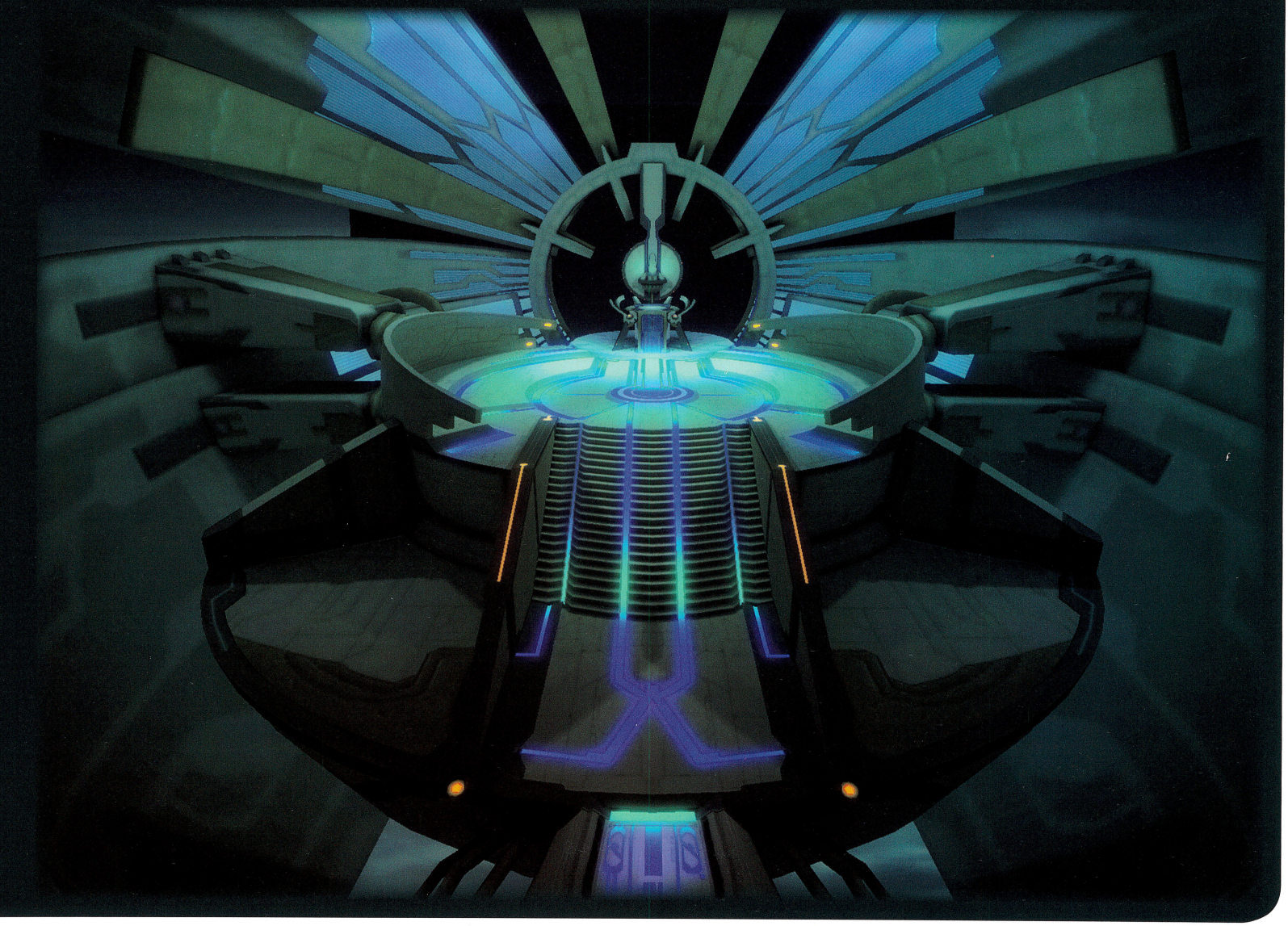
Did members of the *Soul Calibur* team also work on Legendia?
Yes. We had members from the Soul Calibur team working on motion design, character modeling, as well as the backgrounds.

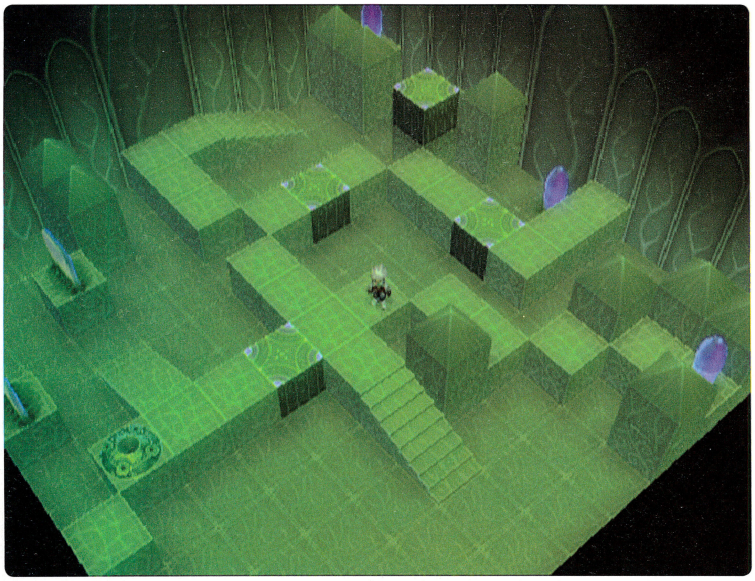
How did Kazuto Nakazawa get involved with to the project?
It all started out with a team member who was a fan of Mr. Nakazawa's work. Mr. Nakazawa is an animator with a long history known for his work in anime series such as N*adia: The Secret of Blue Water*, *Shin Ten-Chi- Muyo*, *El Hazard* and *Record of Lodoss War*. Furthermore, as you might be familiar with scenes from *Kill Bill Vol.1*, *Samurai Champloo*, and Linkin Park's *Breaking the Habit*, Mr. Nakazawa's characters were fit for powerful movements, which was perfect for this game.

Namco Japan and Production I.G. together – that's a powerful endorsement. Did the anime and game production take place simultaneously or did Nakazawa base his animations on final gameplay?
Since the creation of a high quality animation involves a lengthy period of time, the production for the animation



"The most important aspect of an RGP is to allow all RPG gamers to feel a sense of achievement."



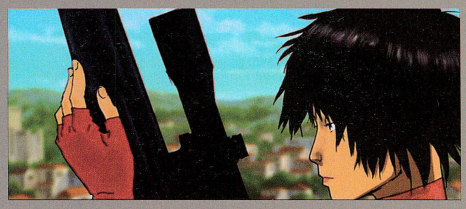




Kazuto Nakazawa

Character Designer





The Tales of Legendia characters were designed by internationally renowned Japanese artist Kazuto Nakazawa, acclaimed for his work on such venerated titles as *Armitage: Dual-Matrix, Bubblegum Crisis: Tokyo 2040, New Dominion Tank Police, Magic Knight Rayearth, Samurai Champloo*, and his amazing anime sequences for *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.



had already begun by the time we were finished with the game scenario, character and visual configurations and the theme song. At the time, Production I.G. was extremely busy with the production of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex,* so we went to them without any expectations. Imagine how grateful we were when they responded with "Please allow us to work with you by all means."

I believe the rousing scene with the Bouncers early on is the first dance number I've ever seen in an RPG. What inspired Legendia's unique in-game events?
The variety of "voices" is one of the appeals of Legendia. With a total of 7 hours of recorded VO in the Japanese version, and voices from the BGMs, we came up with an idea to add some spice to these voices by having some sort of event similar to a musical.

What types of technology strides are you taking with Legendia?
Through the development of a drawing engine which created elements such as fog, glare and the reflection (refraction of light), we were successful at creating a portrayal of a magical and fantastic world. Especially take note of the texture mapping of the character models during battle scenes, since the light is reflecting off the surface of the character models in real time. I think you'll find it adds to the realism of the characters.

What do you feel are the most important aspects of a great RPG?
The most important aspect of an RGP is to allow all RPG gamers to feel a sense of achievement. An RPG easily allows anyone to do amazing things not usually possible in the real world.

The vocal over the theme when you're venturing to the first city is exquisite. Is there much of this in the overworld? Who is that? Anyone we might recognize?
It's not only the first song, but I think you'll find quite a few, right up to the ending. The song playing in the background at Fallingwater was performed by Sony Music Entertainment International's "Kanon," prior to her professional debut last year. She is an artist who combines the best of pop and classical music in a style known as "Classical Crossover." She currently has already released several CDs.

Are there plans to launch a *Legendia* or *Tales* anime series?
There are no definite plans for Legendia yet. However, *Tales of Phantasia* and *Tales of Eternia* were both made into animes in Japan.w

Will the Tales series continue onto next-gen?
Is there a reason for *not* continuing it onto the next-generation console? **play**

"...Production I.G. was extremely busy with the production of Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex, so we went to them without any expectations."

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Psychonotes

Double Fine, Tim Schafer move up in the world

by Greg Orlando





Tim Schafer can look back at his old offices on Clara Street and laugh. The converted warehouse serving as Double Fine Studios' headquarters, one part dump and one part cesspool, had a certain "abandon all hope" charm to it. While Schafer's psychic-themed platformer Psychonauts was being developed, a woman fell through its roof, plunging down roughly 30 feet or so to the office's unyielding cement floors.

Then, it began to rain in San Francisco. And hell came to Clara Street.

"We had a lot of challenges there," Schafer says. "Like the lack of heat and air conditioning and then the intrusion of rats and mice—we had both—into the space. I tried to turn it into a positive thing by trying to write funny stories about it on the [Double Fine] Web site. That was going well and people started mailing me rat traps; it wasn't reflecting that badly on the company. Then, the sewers started to malfunction and whenever it rained we found out —because we didn't know this when we signed the lease—the sewer would back up and raw sewage—human waste—would pour out of the toilet in the downstairs bathroom and out into the hallway. Which was a big bummer."

"You couldn't use the toilets, either the upstairs or the downstairs ones, they were both overflowing with this hideous Cthulhu monster of poo," he says. A nearby deli became Double Fine employees' restroom of choice and, not surprisingly, the story never made it on to Doublefine.com. "I can't put new jobs on the Web page and say, 'By the way, we have feces,'" he say.

Double Fine's new offices are remarkably free of overflowing human wastes. And where there was once a muted squalor, now there are charming brick walls and plenty of Aeron chairs left over from the previous dot com tenants. It's the perfect place for Schafer to regroup



Super skills: The very fine ladies and gentleman of Double Fine Studios.

after Psychonauts and plan for his next video game—the one he's entirely unwilling to talk about.

The game has been dubbed "Buddha," but there's nothing to be gleaned from this. Psychonauts was originally titled "Li Po," and there's nothing revelatory about that, either. Schafer just likes naming his games, at least initially, after bars in San Francisco's Chinatown. "We're just going down the list," Schafer says.

"It's cool. It is awesome. We're really excited about it. It's something I'd wanted to make for a really long time. We're making a playable demo of it right now." This is Schafer speak, meaning it is still too early to talk about the game. Schafer is still negotiating with game companies to find a publisher, and the only other thing he will say is that Buddha is bound for next-generation platforms.

Double Fine, now five years old, employs 39 people, and the new offices are spacious enough to suggest more will be added to the mix; Schafer formed the company after leaving LucasArts, where he worked on the quirky graphic adventures Full Throttle, Day of the Tentacle, and Grim Fandango.

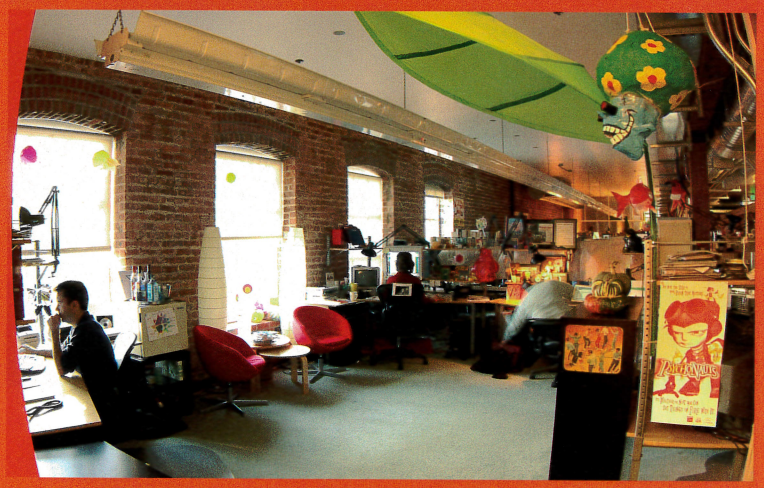
Now, he sits in his office, in a comfy chair in the corner. His feet reach out to touch an Aeron chair, and he spins it as he talks. He looks comfortable in a yellowish Levi's button-down short-sleeve shirt, jeans, and green sneakers. He's quick to laugh, and plays with his hands when it seems like he's thinking about something. It wasn't necessarily easy to leave LucasArts and head out into the uncertain world of independent game development, but Schafer, who's about to be married, seems in a very good place.

A Psychonauts poster on the wall reads, "It's not the size of the brain that matters. It's whether or not you can set things on fire." The poster refers directly to Psychonauts' hero Razputin, but it's not such a leap to suggest it might also refer to Schafer. After all, when Psychonauts won an award for best original game the 2002 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the awarding judge had this to say about its creator: "Tim Schafer is a man so creative that we're almost inclined to kick him out of the gaming industry. Why? The bottom line is that he makes everyone else's games look so damn derivative."

In an industry where originality is welcomed in the manner of the avian flu and independent developers are often forced out of business or absorbed by publishers, Schafer and his Double Fine Studios are as odd as the smiling, two-headed baby thing serving as the company mascot.

"It's very hard to be an independent developer," Schafer says. "It doesn't feel like something the current structure of the industry wants. It costs you a lot in terms of stability. You have to sit there wringing

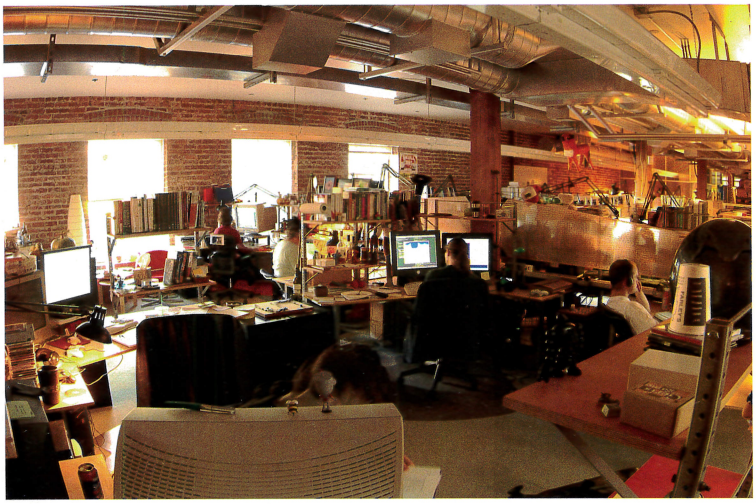
"It's very hard to be an independent developer. It doesn't feel like something the current structure of the industry wants."



Can you pick out the man with the tiny head?







your hands wondering where the next source of funding is going to come from, and all your employees are asking, 'So what's going to happen in this month when the money runs out?' There's not a ton of motivation to stay independent except for your own desire to be independent. "

At Double Fine, Schafer emphasizes creativity and the group process. He says, "Everybody has a piece. The thing you're left with at the end is the result of so many people's input, and you inspire each other to do creative stuff." In Psychonauts, process birthed a world of talking lungfish and a conspiracy theory-themed stage where holding a bouquet of flowers turned the hero into a grieving widow. It was funny, crazy, innovative stuff, but hardly what the game industry embraces.

"Publishers want as few unknowns as possible," Schafer says. "Either the [game] license has to be known or the gameplay model has to be a known seller; preferably they like to use a license and do a Grand Theft Auto-like game or imitate something successful like God of War. Or, you could innovate on one of those things either the gameplay or an original property. And once you talk about innovating on both those ideas gameplay and the license then you're either not going to get approved or you're going to talk about a very low budget."

This seems overly bleak, but Schafer found two separate publishers for Psychonauts, proving there is indeed some room for creativity in the game industry. "At any given time there always seems to be one publisher willing to try and do innovative stuff," he says. "And you've got to try and find that publisher."

"I wander around trying to avoid decision making for most of the day."

For now, it's simply good to be the boss, and in charge. "They say film directors their job is to sit around all day and make hundreds and hundreds of decisions on the spot. I'm very bad at that," he says. "I wander around trying to avoid decision making for most of the day. I make general proclamations like, '[A writer from Play] is coming. Everyone put on your pants.' Or, 'I want to play Mario Kart DS—everybody into the kitchen now.'

"You can do that when you're the boss. That's the best thing about starting your own company—having enough people to play Mario Kart DS with."



Inside Tim Schafer's brain

Six non-sequitors from the Double Fine offices…

On the Pink clock on his desk…
Tim says: I bought that on Ebay. As you might know from the Web site, I went through a brief phase of being obsessed with [pop singer] Pink. Well, not obsessed, but I just thought that if we hung out, we'd get along. So I bought the clock and that solved that problem.

On meeting Dwight Schultz, from TV's The A-Team, during voice-over work for Psychonauts…
Tim says: We got off to a rough start with him because I walked in there and I said, "Oh my god, you're Murdock!" And he looked at me kind of grumpily and said, "I played the character Murdock on TV, but I am not Murdock." It was like, "Okay, Leonard Nimoy."

On making a sequel to Psychonauts…
Tim says: If anyone wanted to fund the sequel to Psychonauts, send your checks to Double Fine. People think I don't like to make sequels, but mostly it's not that I don't want to make sequels. It's just I always want to do something else, and there's only one of me, so I can only do one thing at a time. But now that I have Double Fine, I can actually make two games at once, so doing a sequel is a possibility.

On bad disguises…
Tim says: I've always liked bad disguises. That's why I really love that moment in Day of the Tentacle when [protagonist] Lavern puts on the tentacle. There's a tentacle guarding the stairs, so you take an anatomical chart of a tentacle and you take it back in time to Betsy Ross and she uses it to design the American flag. Then you go back into the future again, take the flag (which is now in the shape of a tentacle), and Lavern wears it as a costume.

On Tim Schafer's brain…
Tim says: [There's a] Large section dedicated to Animal Crossing. A part dedicated to relaxation and TV watching. There's a large part woven through it all that makes sure to distribute a lot of fear and anxiety through the brain at all times. Somewhere in there is the memory, which has just gotten lost. I have no idea where my memory has gone…I think its early onset Alzheimer's. They say that it just comes with just forgetfulness at first, so I am obviously fast on my way to completely losing my mind. Or it might mean that I need some coffee.

On making his brain into a level of Psychonauts…
Tim says: I really wanted to do this thing. I wanted you to be able to take a personality test on our Web site and fill out all these questions and then what it would do is it would spit out a level of Psychonauts you could download and it would be your own brain. First you'd do your own brain, and then you'd try to make the most and sick and twisted brain you could.
When we started designing the brains [in Psychonauts], we thought about the big thing, the hangup or whatever that the character has. I guess if we had to talk about what my brain would look like, I'd first have to talk about what my biggest, major flaw is. And I'm just not going to talk about that.



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XBOX 360

TIMESHIFT

For once, time's actually on your side



Slowing time to catch a simple tactical advantage over the enemy is one thing. Slowing, stopping and reversing time to rearrange the entire game world is an entirely different story—one that the creators of TimeShift like to believe they're rewriting when it comes to the first-person shooter. "So many developers talk about doing something new, and it turns out to be nothing but a gimmick. What we're doing isn't a gimmick," says producer Kyle Peschel. "We're taking the idea of shifting time to a level that will change the way you approach a first-person shooter." TimeShift is still very first-person shooter: big guns going up against army-sized resistance in an endlessly explosive world of violence and destruction. But all the durable genre components take on a different complexion when you're time-traveling Colonel Swift, outfitted with the Quantum Suit. Coming off an experiment gone wrong, you're on the run in a modern city that's been mangled into an alternate reality, ruled over by a nasty regime known as the Era of Krone. With the Quantum Suit and its time-altering facility, you can walk through fire, circumvent security gates, cleverly dodge weapons-fire and even run up to an enemy and swipe their gun as they stand frozen. Because a complex physics model is applied to the world, things really get interesting when you start manipulating time in an effort to displace objects and solve puzzles. For example, you may come across a fallen log or need to shoot down a piece of concrete, deciding to reverse the flow of time and ride the object back to where it was originally positioned. In many of the quagmires you'll find yourself in, the solution can be reached in a number of ways, lending the game a more player-driven feel amidst the scripted events.

Inspired by anime, steam punk and sci-fi, TimeShift's Russian developers are crafting a nicely stylized universe that separates it from the pack. The weapons alone carry a distinct design that, despite their cataloging in the rocket-sniper-shotgun drawer, give you a sense of something different from the genre. TimeShift's one to look out for. Brady Fiechter



"The weapons alone carr… …nct design..."







Environmental damage is nicely represented.

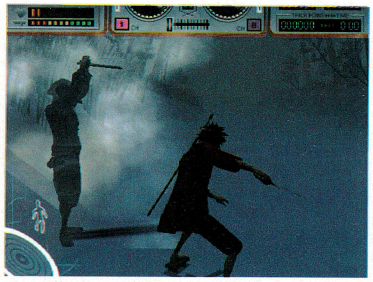
TimeShift Preview

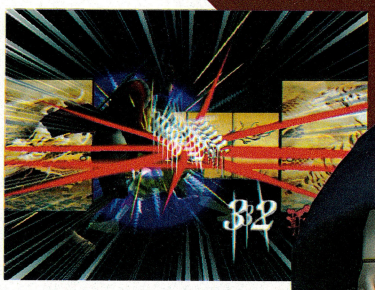
Xbox, Xbox 360, PC

Point of Interest

A few former rocket scientists are on the project.

Developer: Saber Interactive **Publisher:** Atari
Online: TBA **Available:** March





Samurai Champloo

Hack, slash, lather, rinse & repeat

After producing a Cowboy Bebop game so abysmal they chose to leave it in Japan, even though an empty box would have turned a profit, Bandai is determined not to make the same mistake with its spiritual successor, Samurai Champloo—a fusion of 19th-century Samurai action and 21st-century hip-hop that oozes with the same kind of über cool—by enlisting the services of a developer as eclectic as the series itself: Grasshopper Manufacture, producers of the controversial Killer 7.

While the game still has a ways to go, the fundamentals are in place and hip-hopping along nicely, exhibiting a variety of (dare I say) hack-and-slash gameplay in line with the quasi-supernatural samurai action that so invigorates the show. Based on a side story within the context of Mugen, Jin, and Fu's pilgrimage to find the samurai who smells of sunflowers (you can play as either Mugen or Jin initially and unlock a third male [sigh] character), the action is driven by a unique BGM/combo system where the combo style changes depending on the type of music you select, as you expand your collection of tracks (designated by records, as in licorice pizza—anyone remember those?) by purchasing and completing tasks. The more extensive the play list, the more combos at your disposal to be tactically implemented for various situations, while each successful chain fills the "TATE" gauge, culminating in a flurry of silhouettes and blade strikes. It's the ideal concept given the ilk of the show, and I can attest that it plays as good as it sounds: My sole concern rears its confused head when the fighting stops. The Mugen and Jin models look great and animate authentically, but in the version we played neither could walk, which made for some awkward situations. Bandai was unsure whether walking was in the plan or not (which I can only equate to a car manufacturer deciding whether or not to include tires), but assured me that they'd look into it. How anyone could craft an entire game, especially one with as much riding on it as Champloo, and forget to add walking is why I need to gulp Lunesta to go night-night. You'd think that watching their central characters run at a full clip from the door to the counter at a shop might tip them off. Otherwise, Samurai Champloo is looking mighty good for a once powerful category that has grown Nicole Richie-thin of late, so let's hope they take the time (this time) to finish what they've started. I'm sure Watanabe-san wouldn't have it any other way.

Dave Halverson

> "It's the ideal concept given the ilk of the show, and I can attest that it plays as good as it sounds."

Samurai Champloo

Preview

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

Samurai Champloo was created by Shinichiro Watanabe who also created Macross Plus and Cowboy Bebop.

Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture **Publisher:** Bandai
Online: None **Available:** March 2006





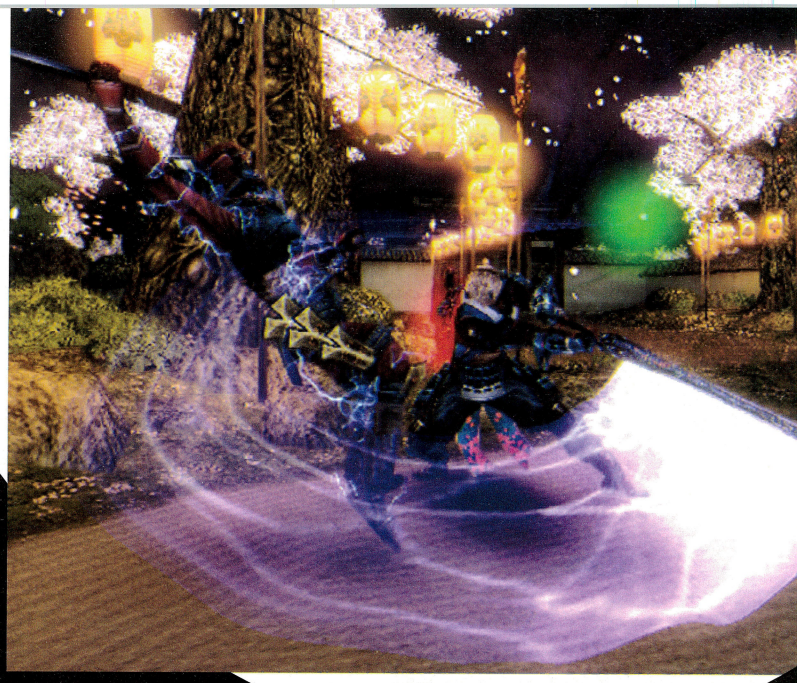
Mugen lays down a TATE combo... That's gonna leave a BIG mark.



Onimusha
Dawn of Dreams

The series continues on strong





Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams is the fourth installment in Capcom's premier samurai-action series. While a good game in many regards, Onimusha 3 rubbed some fickle fans the wrong way when it incorporated modern-day settings with a recognizable actor playing the part of hero. This time out, the traditional spirit of the series is taking the lead, relying on more mystical qualities and a darker, more sinister feudal Japan battle ground.

The game puts you 15 years beyond the fall of brutal Japanese warlord Oda Nobunaga. Hungry for the power he once coveted, successor to the thrown Hideyoshi Toyotomi joins the malevolent Genma forces, resigning his corrupted soul to the point of no return. As the game begins, you play as Soki, a confident, emboldened young warrior who decides it's time to end Hideyoshi's reign. If you're familiar with the Onimusha series, you'll feel right at home as the action starts, stabbing away with your giant samurai sword, absorbing the souls of the fallen and wielding magical attacks in a flurry of simple combos. But in a welcome turn, you're soon joined by other warriors, each possessing unique moves and the ability to link up for powerful group attacks.

Allies will come in and out of the picture depending on the situation at hand. Sometimes you may have to rescue a fallen comrade, other times you work together to solve a puzzle or defeat an otherwise impossible pack of enemies. With immediate control over your allies, you're able to switch over on the fly, and when the AI takes over, basic commands can be ordered, such as wait, attack, all out and special.

Playing out over chapters, Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams periodically transports your team back to a hideout for rest and conversation. There's a fuller role-playing component to the game; you'll find yourself applying points to a decent variety of skills and equipment upgrades, combining items and purchasing an assortment of new goods. Universal attributes like attack, critical, guard and absorb all have subsets, giving you a decent variety of tailoring the individual players.

"...in a welcome turn, you're soon joined by other warriors..."

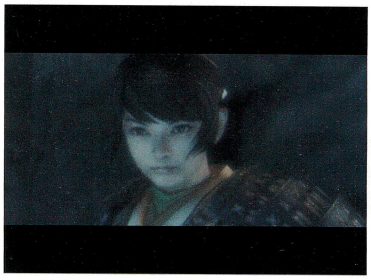


Some great effects beef up the superb visuals.

No one can deny the visual sophistication and graceful artistry that's marked the Onimusha series, but the rich environments have always been fairly closed down. This latest engine looks as good as ever, packing in more detail and enemies while providing more freedom of exploration in a more sprawling world. Capcom's doing a fine job taking this latest Onimusha into satisfying sequel territory.

Brady Fiechter







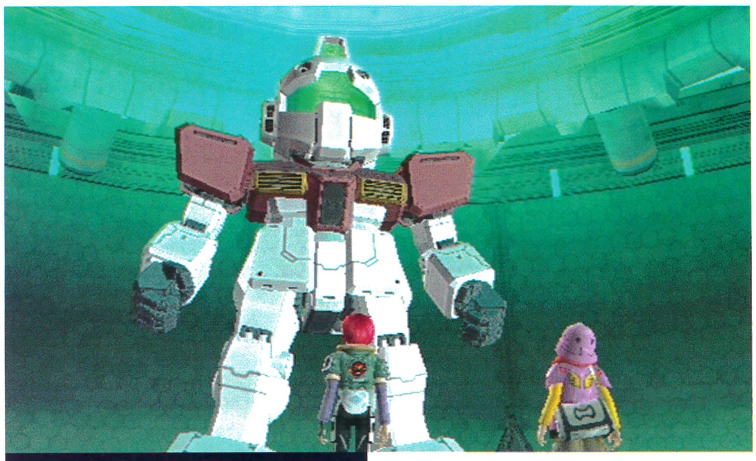
Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams — Preview

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

Capcom wants this latest Onimusha to appeal to a more hardcore audience

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom
Online: None **Available:** March

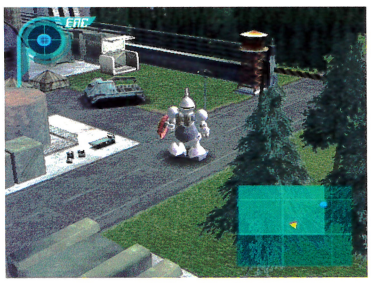




MS Saga
A New Dawn

Mobile Suits keep on going, and going...





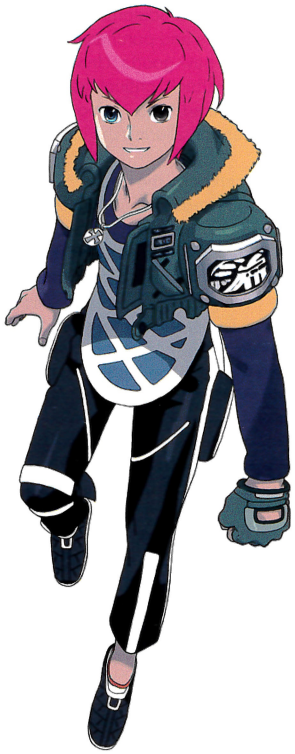
The field maps are surprisingly detailed given the contrast in scale.

Having released countless Gundam fighters and strategy games of every shape, size, and kind, Bandai has finally answered the call and crafted their first traditional Gundam RPG and made it look easy in the process, devising a clever story, exemplary character design, and above all a compelling creation component that allows fans to mix and match Gundam parts like they've never imagined. Fancy a Zeta Gundam chassis with a Federation saber and color scheme? Such blasphemy may be akin to Darth Vader piloting an X-Wing to a Star Trek convention, but why not, as long as the context supports it—which it does.

Taking place after "The Great Fall," a cataclysmic event that claimed 90% of the Earth's population, along with art, history, and science, the Universal Century is no more than a chapter in history and Mobile Suits the ancient weapons of a bygone race. That is until people begin using the G-system cores to reawaken them and do as humans always do: make war. One such goon, Vladi Zarth, together with his Dark Alliance, is well on his way to taking over what's left of the world, when our heroes, Tristan and Fritz, set out for a little payback. United after the orphanage they called home was obliterated by Vladi—their beloved surrogate mother, Mrs. Natalie, killed in the blaze—they have vowed to destroy him no matter the cost, and so with their friend, Marie (who resembles a cross between a dominatrix and Little Red Riding Hood), running intel, they set out to exact their revenge after liberating a couple of painfully stock mobile suits. Soon after, they are joined by Aeon, a winsome teenage girl with amnesia whom they rescued from the clutches of a Dark Alliance goon, and are befriended by the Commander of the acting army, Hal Vizart, whose base serves as the first outpost for rigging the mobile suits, among other things.



"Character development is alive and well in MS Saga..."



As you can imagine (or perhaps not, in which case you'll just have to trust me), Gundams make for some extremely compelling turn-based battles, devising tactics based on ranged and melee aggressors, along with unique new tactics like boost attacks (which allow you to charge for a turn and unleash powerful specials) and earned techniques that become active as you amass points in battle. The game is for the most part traditional otherwise, although it feels more unique than it actually is, due to the history associated with the mobile suits set against the heavily contrasted steam-punk-meets-Victorian-patchwork society and a truly inspired cast. Character development is alive and well in MS Saga, as Bandai seems to finally be doing more of what they do best: combining their anime division's storytelling prowess with their game division's deft handling of their brands. Imagine what will happen when Namco begins developing these franchises. We need strong Japanese publishers in America now more than ever and I can't imagine a more powerful combo than that. In the mean time, climb aboard. Dave Halverson

MS Saga: A New Dawn

Preview

PlayStation 2

Point of Interest

The term "Gundam" comes from the English word "Gun" and the last syllable of the word "Freedom," "Dom," to form the word "Gundom"...

Developer: Bandai Games Inc. **Publisher:** Bandai
Online: None **Available:** January

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Finally out of the closet





A day in the life of the Play staff member begins with Cheez Doodles and oftentimes ends with fire. A day in the life of counter-terrorist Jack Bauer might see him driving around Los Angeles, shooting it out with men of low character, defusing bombs, saving the vice president from assassination, and locating thugs via high-technology.

As Bauer and two other characters from the Fox TV show 24, players will be thrown into an ever-shifting mix of gameplay, all of it done surprisingly well. Missions are deftly strung together; after a series of intense shootouts, Bauer must capture a suspect alive to interrogate him. Interrogation plays out as a mini-game, with the hero alternately coxing, calming, and aggressively hounding the suspect via a series of gameplay button presses, with the idea being to keep the suspect's stress at a pre-determined level. Once information is extracted, it's then necessary to hunt down suspects in a series of buildings by tracking their heat signature and, finally, taking them out with a first-person perspective sniper sequence. 2K Games promises more than 100 missions, here, all very neatly fitting into what may be someone's best, PlayStation 2-exclusive, day ever.

Greg Orlando

24

PlayStation 2

Preview

Point of Interest

The story bridges the gab between seasons 1 and 2

Developer: Sony Computer Entertainment Europe
Publisher: 2K Games **Available:** Spring 2006





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"Most 'cinematic moments' in games wouldn't pass rudimentary Film School 101."

interview

Cliff Bleszinski



Cliff Bleszinski, better known as CliffyB, has been making games for over a decade now, getting his start with the creation of Jazz Jackrabbit before serving as the creative force behind the Unreal series. His latest project, the sci-fi action adventure Gears of War, on which he serves as lead designer, is one of the most anticipated games coming to Xbox 360 next year. The always personable, always enthusiastic CliffyB took time out of his heinous schedule to chat about his philosophies and the mind of a game designer.

by Brady Fiechter

You've been making first-person shooters for years, and now you're jumping into the third-person with Gears of War. It's still all about action. What defines a CliffyB game, what is it that you games will always have in them that makes them good?
Clarity of experience. It's always obvious what's going on. Easy to learn, a lifetime to master. Games that cut to the chase and get to the meat/core of the experience. No masturbatory cutscenes that go on for ten minutes at a time.

Are you becoming more aware of a distinct vision in your games—perhaps seeing yourself entering a new phase as an artist and as a gamemaker?
With Gears I'm able to weave in some of my own personal feelings about conflict; about war, about camaraderie, and about redemption. I'm also finally realizing what I'm about – what my "thing" is. Maybe it's because I turned thirty this year – I'm not sure – but I finally woke up and started to understand that I love … architecture. (Should have seen that one coming considering my level design past!) In doing Gears I wanted to make sure we were able to make some extraordinary locations… and then feel an immense weight and sadness as those locales are blown to hell.

Where's an area you think the industry as a whole can improve on with game design, with taking video games to that true next level of entertainment?
Just last night I checked out a few new titles from our company library and spent a good while beating on them at home and found myself skipping cutscene after cutscene. If you're going to do cinematics, make sure they're great – and short – and never, ever forget that we're making an interactive medium here. Any time you're watching a movie you're not playing the *game*. I'm not bashing on having story elements in games; far from it – I believe the narrative is one very powerful tool that we as designers can use to motivate the user – I'm advocating for shorter cutscenes – and less of them – and better ones – and until that happens I'll be mashing the A button to skip them. Really, does anyone like this boring, badly written, poorly directed garbage? I certainly don't. Most "cinematic moments" in games wouldn't pass rudimentary Film School 101.

You've said once that the ultimate game is one where playing feels like being in a dream.
What can I say, I'm a dreamer. Every night I'm tossing and turning, either blissfully enjoying the experience of flying like Superman or shaking in fear as I'm chased by a ten story flaming monstrosity and trying to hide. I've always been this way. I remember once when I was a child I woke up from a nightmare and for what seemed like a good few minutes I was convinced my bedroom floor was covered in tarantulas.

Too many game designers today don't seem to understand they have a powerful platform for personal expression. Am I right or wrong with a statement like that? Perhaps it is more of a misuse of that expression.
Bar none, hands down, this is the most powerful medium in entertainment today. And that scares the hell out of a lot of people, those who did not grow up joystick in hand, quarter in pocket. We need to fight back to make sure games are not an ancillary product. Jason Rubin ranted about this a couple of years back at the DICE conference in Las Vegas. He says we're bottled water; I like to say we're Underoos. To many people we're merely one item that a corporate figure rattles off to tie into another bigger – seemingly more important – property.
We're the rapper's toy product. We're the interactive version of the film. We're the extension of existing brands instead of driving the entertainment business.

Is there a game out there you can look at and call truly beautiful?

Ico and Shadow of the Colossus are beautiful works of art.

How will games be different in five years?
I fear that they'll be more homogenized, watered down, licensed properties.

What's the biggest mistake the industry makes as a collective in designing the modern game?
Not making an impact in the first ten minutes. Making me suffer through boring tutorials instead of teaching me within the context of the universe. Did we not learn anything from "Hooked on Phonics"? Learning should be so fun that you don't realize you're learning! I played the new True Crime last night and had to suffer through 20 minutes of cutscenes and tutorials before I actually started to get to the cool part of the game – being a good cop or a bad cop – why didn't they just start with that? Cut to the chase people, gamers are busy as am I – show me why your game is cool right from the start. Come out of the gates swinging. Both Halos started with a bang and hooked you in right from the start and taught you how to play the game while you were under attack.

How do you see yourself needing to improve?
Less talk, more action. Wait for Gears to come out and see if I delivered on all the stuff I'm ranting about here!

There are a lot of divergent opinions right now—some negative, some dire, some confused—about the current climate of the industry. How do you see it?
We need to worry a lot more. I could write a 400 page paper on what's wrong with the business right now but a few quick thoughts are:
Price point – Games *need* to get down to the magic point of $20. How is it that a film can be budgeted at 100 million to make and still make money – at $8 a ticket – at $17 for a DVD – yet a game can cost 20 million and still cost $50 and still lose money?
Length – Games *need* to be shorter. I would kill for an amazing rollercoaster game that costs 20 dollars and takes four hours to beat.
There's an ever-growing delta between newbie gamers and hardcore ones and the same divide is happening between Western and Eastern gamers. Making a game that sells to all audiences is truly a difficult task. It's easier with films – a blockbuster like War of the Worlds may not be deep on dialogue but the geeks appreciate the fiction and the effects whereas families enjoy the journey that Cruise's character goes on to repair his broken family unit.
Finally, game designers need to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and adjust for it. A designer that's great at behind the scenes spreadsheet balancing has no place creating characters. A designer that makes great characters and writes well but is poor at polish and balancing has no place in the game mechanics. We need to compartmentalize the process more and those in charge need to learn to delegate in the areas they're weak at in order to make a better product.

"Games need to get down to the magic point of $20."

You're fortunate to be working on an original idea. How can we get more gamers to start buying more progressive titles and get out of this sequel mire the industry is stuck in?
Nothing's wrong with sequels in the video game business – to a point. I'll often read a review of a game and wait for the sequel to make sure any balancing and bug issues are ironed out. I didn't play GTA or Burnout until their third iterations and I found that going back, the previous versions just weren't as good.
Why are gamers buying sequels? Because fifty dollars is still a ton of money and they're not willing to take many risks with their dollars. Ever drop fifty of your own hard earned dollars on a crappy game? You're only going to do that once or twice before you swear off gaming altogether.

What do you love about being a video game designer?
Why, all the hookers and blow I can handle of course.


Gears of War=want it now.

"I loved exploring the woods, delivering the newspaper..."

Er, no, what I meant was that I get to create universes – and then play in them – and then let other people experience that very same magic. Hearing gamers waiting in line – in the cold, pouring rain - for an Xbox 360 – talk about Gears of War, reading the previews, seeing what people are saying, eventually shipping the game, traveling around the world to promote it, meeting fans, celebs, all of it…
Oh and the fact that I get paid for this too.

You admire architecture. How does that influence you as a gamemaker.
Architecture inspires me. I love gothic, art deco, and post-modern styles. I believe that ghosts are not necessarily spirits of the dearly departed, they can be the resonating energy left behind from a relationship… or a place. There's a weight that hits you in the chest when you go to a beautiful cathedral or a skyscraper. 9/11 haunted me for so long; it still does sometimes – not only for the loss of life but also to see such an achievement of man brought down in mere minutes.

What's your biggest frustration?
Suburban America is so homogenized these days that actually finding a place with a bit of history is a challenge. Want to know what irks me? Restaurants like The Cheesecake Factory. Citywalk at Universal Studios. Freemont Street in Las Vegas. I like places that have history, places where the paint is actually peeled because of the passing of time, not because some artist came in and made it look weathered. I find it to be a crying shame that people travel to New York City and go to Times Square and eat at an Olive Garden.
What does this have to do with games? It terrifies me that this could be what our target audience is or is evolving towards. The kind of consumer that would go to Japan and eat at KFC instead of finding a fresh sushi bar and throwing down with the locals.

Is the Xbox 360 gonna hit or become a glorified Dreamcast?
It had better be a hit; the game I'm building depends on it. I honestly think Microsoft is going to market this system so much – and so well – that even if it was an empty box that you planted your Chia pet in it'd still do pretty decently.

What do you like/dislike about the system?
Running games in HD is amazing. The wireless controller – out of the box? Genius. The faceplates are totally ancillary but I can't help but love them. Knowing that my E3 edition is worth a few hundred and is sitting on it somehow makes me smile. It's just… tight. A very snug, enjoyable, clean evolution of the videogame platform.
What do I dislike? Every time I come home drunk I trip over that damned brick of a power supply. It's replaced my cat and my coffee table as the de facto thing I stumble over in my apartment.

What was the first video game you ever played?
Space Invaders on the Atari 2600 – I was six or seven. We were doing jumping jacks in an attempt to impersonate the top row of aliens who appeared to be flailing their arms in a similar manner.

Were you a hopeless addict from the start?
Hooked like a crackhead.

How did games define your life growing up?
I recently spoke with a woman who informed me that her two nephews just sit inside and play games all day. She asked me if I was like that growing up, surely she was anticipating that my response would confirm her suspicions. The truth? I wasn't like that at all; I was outside every opportunity I had. I loved exploring the woods, delivering the newspaper to the neighborhood, catching frogs and snakes, building forts, lighting fires, all of the things that any good ol' American kid should be getting up to. Sitting on your ass all day long playing games makes you a boring, obese, pasty loser.

In Smartbomb, the authors make a vague reference to you having a rough childhood.
How has that defined who you are today, perhaps the way you create and why you create?

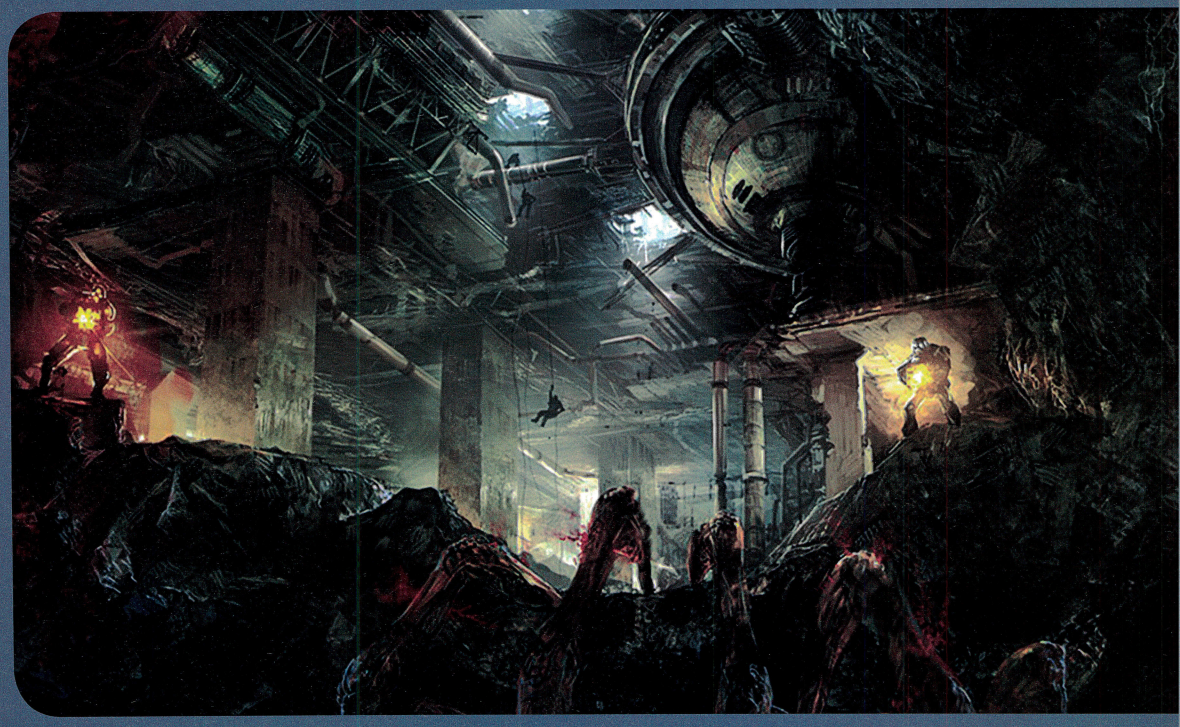
I went through my share of crap as a kid; I think everyone does at one point. It helped drive me in my early years of development to kick ass and be a success. I'm thankful of everything that's happened to me in my life as it's made me who I am today. I wouldn't change a bit of it.

We met over drinks for the first time a few years ago, and I was struck by your ability to hold people's attention with your rock star energy. You like attention.
I'm usually tremendously entertaining when I have caffeine or alcohol in my system. Otherwise I'm just quiet and ornery. I'm clearly overcompensating for not being popular in high school. I'm quite shy; it takes every ounce of my being to be social.

And you love what you do, you bring something unhinged and knowing to the table.
And as any creative type, you're overcompensating for something.
Whatever I'm overcompensating for is strictly between me and my therapist.

What is your biggest insecurity as a gamemaker?
The scariest thing is that fine line between challenging and frustrating. Too many folks are willing to try a game only to give up and blame themselves, putting down the controller and claiming "I'm just not good at games."
That and I really want to make sure that Paris Hilton plays Gears of War and loves every minute of it. That's how you know when you, as a creative, have truly arrived. What do you want to achieve that you haven't yet?

Best game of the year… and the one game you wish you created.
God of War and Resident Evil 4 are hands down two of the best games ever made. And you know what? They're not that original in design. There aren't a lot of elements in those games that are unique or new. They just executed on the formula extraordinarily well and, in a sea of mediocre product, that's something to get excited about. **play**



Monster Madness

Xbox 360

Developer: Artificial Studios **Publisher:** TBA **Available:** Q1 2006 (UK)

I'm amazed that Monster Madness hasn't found a home in the US yet. The game looks like a top-down gamer's dream come true incorporating a full, rich single-player game with 4-player co-op action online. The setting here is a simple, yet beloved one, where hordes of monsters attack you from all sides, for you to either dispense with malice or quick-dodge to avoid. The game boasts vehicles, customizable weapons, advanced physics and of course killer graphics, running on the Reality Engine to take full advantage of the most advanced Shader Model 3.0 capabilities, including High Dynamic Range Rendering and fully dynamically lit and shadowed worlds. **Dave**





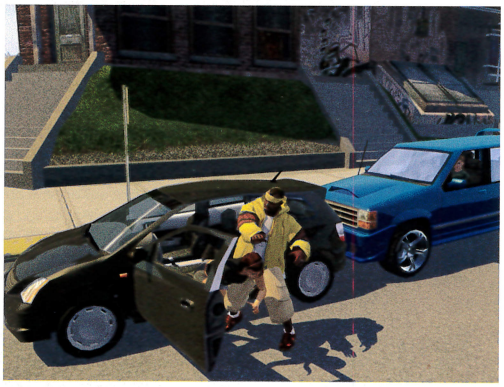


Saints Row

Xbox 360

Developer: Volition **Publisher:** THQ **Available:** Q1 2006

3rd Street Saints are in trouble. Gangs and corrupt officials are upping the violence on the streets, but they're not about to go down quietly. The city of Stilwater is up for the taking, so it's up to you to tour the town, building respect among your shady piers. And yes, that does of course include car jacking and other fun exploits of the criminally unconscionable. The gameplay is open to pretty much whatever you want. If you're in the mood to off a shop keeper, go for it. Tired of making money the honest way, find ways to make the cash the forceful way. Characters are also customizable, so you can create your perfect version of virtual criminal. **Brady Fiechter**



Disgaea 2

PlayStation 2

Dev: Nippon Ichi Software **Pub:** NIS America **Available:** Summer 20 06

Apparently the number of gamers willing to park it for 50-odd hours to have at Nippon Ichi's wonderful brand of tactical role-playing numbers in the many 10s of 1000s and it's easy to see why, beginning with among the finest character design (by Takehito Harada) in gaming today. Fact is there are no finer tactical battles on 3D grid maps in all the land and this year's offering is seemingly bursting with new gloss. Tacked on to the usual parade of tactics like assists, combos, and lift and throw, '06 marks the return of the "Dark Court", only now a character that starts trouble will actually be taken to court where he or she will be given the chance to mount a defense with an attorney. **Dave Halverson**



Black

PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, GameCube

Developer: Criterion **Publisher:** EA **Available:** March 2006

So here's the deal: you're Sergeant First-Class Jack Kellar, a military guy who leads Black ops teams into war. In Black, you're dropped into Europe, where you'll destroy every single object and human that can possibly be destroyed. The game contains "advanced destructive environments." These means everything blows up, crumbles, falls apart and hits something else, which continues to crumble till you're finally satisfied that you can't possible destroy anything else. Forget realism; Black's only concern is balls-out action. **Brady Fiechter**







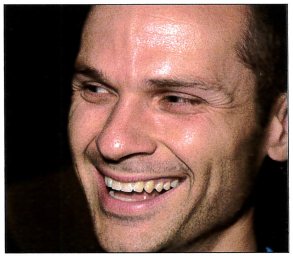
Bio hazard



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, motocross, action-RPGs, 2D action
Now playing: Kameo, Tokobots, Sonic Rush
All I want for Xmas: Mint Wild Riders and Stadium Cross coin-ops please.



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Mario Baseball
All I want for Xmas: Enough time to finish Dragon Quest VIII



Greg Orlando
Associate Editor

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

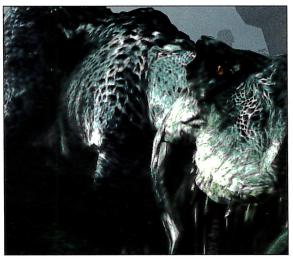
Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Fable: The Lost Chapters
All I want for Xmas: For everybody to Wang Chung tonight.



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Call of Duty 2
All I want for Xmas: a godly plasma TV



T-Rex
Eating Machine

Since bidding farewell to the wonderful and lovely Miss Esqueda, we've yet to fill this now-vacant celebrity square. So while we search high and low for a suitable lunatic who lives and breathes all things video games, one of Michel Ancel's lovely T-Rexs will be holding down the fort. Send your resumes.

Favorite genre: Survival Horror
Now Playing: In Peter Jackson's King Kong
All it wants for Xmas: The *before* cast of The Biggest Loser...on a stick.



Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Dragon Quest VIII
All I want for Xmas: An answer

Reviews

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Kameo: Elements of Power 040

After what seemed like an eternity, evolving over 3 generations of console, Kameo finally spilled into our midst, having benefitted from each and every step along the way. For those of us who love our Rare platformers, this truly is the greatest gift of this or any other holiday season.

Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

10...**Perfect**
9...**Extraordinary**
8...**Great**
7...**Good**
6...**Decent**
5...**Average**
4...**Below average**
3...**Poor**
2...**Bad**
1...**Terrible**





QUAKE 4

Matthew Kane is a marine. He has joined the Rhino Squad, an elite force of bad-asses who yell a lot, have big attitudes and carry even bigger guns. They're out to terminate the Strogg, and that's all you need to know. Or care to know, despite Quake 4's attempt to bring a supporting narrative into what is nothing more than a very old-school first-person shooting gallery as familiar as the Quakes and Dooms before it.

This can be a good thing when the action is at its simplistic best. Quake 4 packs plenty of effective firepower, with classic weapons like the nail gun and rocket launcher leaving satisfying marks on the creepy Strogg. The enemy placement is fun and challenging, setting up some fun challenges that make up for the moments when the AI gets a little loopy. When the solid action leaves the claustrophobic confines of steel corridors and computer-filled labs for the outdoors, the game loses its charge as pedestrian vehicle battles pass as filler.

While Quake 4's shadowy, metallic aesthetic is visually striking, pumped up by the powerful Doom 3 engine and its moody lighting, the mostly indoor setting looks awfully familiar, and you start to tire of the homogeny of the generic underground architecture by game's end. Quake 4 hits you with some strong moments, but not before a little too much monotony seeps in from the gameplay—backtracking begone!—and enemy designs.

The most persisting blemish comes from the poor frame rate, which sucks some of the fun out of the fast-paced running-and-gunning. This is Xbox 360 after all, and the graphical hits get so disruptive at times you kind of feel gypped having to deal on a new system. Still, the game packs some decent chills and engaging action when it's working, carrying over some addictive, classic deathmatch play into the online arena. Brady Fiechter

Quake 4 — **7.0** Score

Xbox 360

+ The Doom 3 engine is put to nice use; the lighting still impresses

− Some boring mission objectives and unacceptable frame rate issues

Developer: Raven **Publisher:** Activision
Online: 8-player **Available:** November





Pulling out the big guns online...

"Quake 4 packs plenty of effective firepower..."



Half-Life 2

Everything the PC world praised it to be



As a console snob, coveting my PC neighbors is a rare occasion, but when they receive a game like Half-Life 2, it hurts. There were few games last year more critically acclaimed than Half-Life 2, and now I'm grateful to know why.

Huge credit goes to Valve for preserving the core of the progressive technology driving this remarkable first-person shooter. The advanced physics, photo-real textures and exceptional character animations never fail to impress, even when the frame rate and persistent loading breaks crack the experience. It's the magnificent design of it all that ultimately triumphs.

As research scientist Gordon Freeman, you're on a mission of freedom, an unwitting leader of an underground resistance working to free a city from its despotic rule. There is a feeling of constant tension as you flee from the enemy across land and water, passing through one expertly staged scene after another. The world is compelling in its visual completeness, serving up an inescapable web of despair, loneliness and isolation. I absolutely love the way the game creates a forlorn society and its inhabitants on the brink of collapse, with we, the player, lost in the massive sprawl of it all, fending for our lives.

The obsessive attention to the finer details is part of the tremendous immersion. Every board, every metal fence, every gun shot and explosion and clink and clank is represented to a terrific degree. Factor in the physical presence of many of the objects in the game and you have a virtual space that consumes. It's a devilish rush to be able to engage your gravity gun, rip a saw blade off a table and send it slicing through a mass of mutants when conserving shotgun ammunition happens to be the current top priority.

The well-told story and its expansive presentation—there's a foundational role-playing quality to the game—elevates the emotion of the experience. Half-Life 2 is special in many ways, not the least in the vast reach of variety of design. But it's how all this variety and detail is implemented and structured that positions the game as such a uniquely enveloping adventure.

Brady Fiechter

Some of the creatures in the game are a towering presence...





"The world is compelling in its visual completeness, serving up an inescapable web of despair, loneliness and isolation."





Half-Life 2

Xbox

Score: 9.0

The immersion of it all is unbelievable; the sound effects and animations complete the experience.

The engine strains to show us this incredibly complete world; some of the chase scenes drag.

Developer: Valve **Publisher:** EA
Online: None **Available:** November



Prince of Persia

The Two Thrones

Royal rumble

The Prince of Persia could be his own best friend, or his own worst enemy. Literally. In his new adventure, the third in the Ubisoft-produced Prince of Persia series, he's of two minds on the singular subject of his body. Part-time, he's the Prince who starred in Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time and its sequel Warrior Within, a regular good guy out to rescue his beloved Babylon from evil. The rest of the time, he's the Dark Prince, a sort of nihilistic no-goodnik who's just out to wreck stuff.

Pardon the pun—the platformer Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones leaps off from this well-worn premise, but manages to do some interesting things with it. It would have been supremely easy for Ubisoft to offer two playable heroes here with only minor or, perhaps, solely cosmetic differences between the two, but that didn't happen. Both the Prince and his evil counterpart look, fight, and even skulk differently from one another. When the Prince is in charge, the game tends to emphasize stealth and planning; platforms become perches from which to drop down behind enemies in order to perform special one- or two-hit speed kills. The Dark Prince, however, can plow through enemies in the manner of a hot knife through butter, and the game shifts gears to emphasize this.

The new additions to the game serve to shore up some of the series' deficiencies. Chariot racing is out-and-out thrilling, with dust being kicked up and a pounding clatter of hooves as the Prince careens madly through a sandstone-laden cityscape. The stealth kills provide an excellent alternative to the game's otherwise stolid combat; overhangs become platforms from which to launch surprise attacks, and the game takes on a welcome strategic element here. Trying to find the pathway that will lead the Prince directly behind or above an unwitting foe becomes a delightful challenge in itself.

Thrones features some of gaming's finest platforming. There's something incredibly satisfying about navigating these jumping puzzles. Simply, all the elements neatly fit together: a series of simple and responsive controls, a hero who will reach at ledges and otherwise try to compensate for iffy jumps, and a series of environmental objects that never seem placed in the world solely so some video game guy can hop onto them. There's always a way to get from A to B, and it never seems contrived. More importantly, the game neither holds players' hands or pushes them away with a series of jumps only an automaton with computerized coordination could make.

And, to the point, someone needs coronation. Greg orlando



"Both the Prince and his evil counterpart look, fight, and even skulk differently from one another."

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones — **9.0** Score

Xbox, PS2, GC

+ Solid platforming, good new additions to gameplay.

− Poorly placed save points, some of the combat is uninspired.

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Online: NA **Available:** November



Somebody wants his pound of flesh.



Kameo

Elements of Power

Best of launch—hands, wings, rocks, paws, tentacles, and claws down

Not so long ago (although the galaxy seems far, far away) 3D Rare platformers were among the most anticipated games in the world. Their brand was synonymous with Nintendo and blockbuster status was a forgone conclusion. Banjo Kazooie and Tooie, and especially Jet Force Gemini, represented huge leaps in 3D game design and stood as the high-water mark for an entire industry; and all this after they revolutionized 2D gameplay with the Battletoads and Donkey Kong Country series. But that was then, this is now, and the tables have turned. Rare no longer makes games for the devoted Nintendo crowd, and elsewhere gamers' thirst for talking reptiles and fairy tale lands has been replaced by men with guns and urban sprawls. Not that I'm not along for the occasional ride, I just never left Oz; but I'm the new minority. Hopes that Kameo might reignite the category for Microsoft began to wane when Psychonauts underperformed, but having beaten every last troll to a pulp, I don't see how anyone that experiences Kameo can avoid being touched by it in some way. Nevertheless, while the Revolution will surely be safe haven for the kind, games of this ilk on 360 may be a thing of the past.

> "The control is superb, the scope heretofore unimaginable, and the presentation royal in pedigree."



This page: just a few of your ten new best friends.









Kameo is pure wonder—every inch a rubbernecker's paradise. There's so much to see and take in on your way to each magical land that it increases blood flow to the brain, never mind once you cross each threshold into lands teeming with life. Although the formula is a simple one—enter the land, return the element to the Wotnot Book, beat the ensuing level—the layers within each scenario are akin to a gameplay shopping spree, and Kameo herself (aside from being dynamic to the landscape, thank you very much) is the quintessential fantasy icon. There's so much to discover and do within the context of the story that you become a part of each bustling community, although to what extent lies with you (just bear in mind that a well-fed elemental warrior will pay maximum dividends down the line). Speaking of which, the one element of the game that had me perched on the proverbial fence—



The texture work and lighting in Kameo are beyond extraordinary.





"Kameo is pure wonder—every inch a rubbernecker's paradise."

morphing from beautiful fairy to fairytale creature—quickly became among the most ingenious gameplay devices I've ever had the pleasure of ogling. It's easy to see why Rare was so committed to the Elements of Power: The diversity of gameplay they afford presents a level of variety and choice seldom, if ever, seen on such an epic scale, and the option to consult the chatty Wotnot Book should you lose your way (Ortho is the new Cranky Kong); the perfect means to strike an alliance between casual and hardcore audiences. It's one thing to happen upon a giant captive troll that blows away anything you've ever seen, but it's quite another to begin cycling through your quiver of creatures—which by then have become your pets (unless you're a total stiff)—to devise a way to free it so you can follow in its destructive wake. Kameo is like Pokemon for the teen-and-up crowd, surrounded by gameplay for the ages. There's no denying the bond between man and oil spurting, fire breathing, tongue lashing beasts. And the sights and sounds of Kameo, from its miraculous inner war zone to its every village, keep, cavern, and castle, raise the bar and then heave it like a javelin into the waiting ass of nearly all comers. The control is superb, the scope heretofore unimaginable, and the presentation royal in pedigree. Time passes and affects the whole of the land, details astound, and the models and architecture require frequent stops followed by either light sobbing or short benedictions to Rare for building us such a grand place to play.

By the time you reach the final showdown with Kameo's lovely sibling (or not) and Thorn the Troll King, you'll be manipulating 10 cagey creatures (and, if you've done your homework, armed them each with lethal tactics) with ease—a one-elf army bearing down on the last of many epic bosses ...mouth still agape. It's a bittersweet victory for sure as the end of a game that was late even by Rare standards marks the beginning of the wait for the next. I only hope they don't take as long on Battletoads. Psyche! Of course that's wishful thinking...but imagine, just for a moment, their world (toad skin!) and this technology. Why should Turtles have all the fun? Dave Halverson



Kameo: Elements of Power

Xbox 360

9.5 Score

+ A Rare epic with graphics beyond your wildest dreams, uber-evolving gameplay, a fantastic score, and a breathtaking female lead.

- I know it's selfish but I'd gladly trade in the co-op components for 5 or so more hours of single player.

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Microsoft **Online:** 2p split-screen co-op , content d/l **Available:** November



Peter Jackson's

KING KONG

The Official Game of the Movie

The king of movie games

It's not just the pervading craft behind Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie that makes it memorable as one of the best movie-based video games. It's the daring of Michel Ancel and his team to make a game that ventures outside the typically rigid formula imposed on these types of projects. You feel like you're playing a game drawn from the spirit of the film, yet not confining the gamemaker's personal vision to the sideline.

King Kong takes place on Skull Island, a treacherous and beautiful setting where dinosaurs roam and belligerent natives hide in waiting. The game proceeds on a very strict path, guiding you along with scripted events and helpful allies, but the sense of adventure remains strong. The fluid design of the island and the undulating way you wind through the dense scenery create a remarkable sense of immersion. Little touches in the first-person perspective, like intermittently reaching out to brush away grass and leaves, work wonders in planting you into the world.

The sounds that move all around you are also wonderfully implemented. The falling rain, the clash of lightning, the crackle of a blazing torch—it's all film-like in arrangement, especially effective coming from the Xbox 360. When King Kong screams in a fit of rage, it's both frightening and exhilarating.

Playing as King Kong is a blast as he scales vertiginous cliff walls, swinging on trees and boulders as he takes to the chase. On solid ground, battles are waged with dinosaurs and other creatures indigenous to the island. Gigantic and fiercely powerful, Kong isn't the spryest, most controllable character, but the scope of his size and strength are so effectively imparted that the laden control becomes forgivable. Violently wrestling a T-Rex to the ground and snapping its jaw in two is awesome.

As good as the action is, it does get occasionally bogged down by too many encounters with the same creatures and an island that needs more visual variety, leaving what is a surprise emotional core

"The sounds that move all around you are also wonderfully implemented."

I absolutely love the look of this game...



to King Kong to elevate the experience. There's a scene near the end of the game that's quite jolting, a reminder that visualized, sympathetic characters can be an invaluable tool in game expression. There's very little story beyond the setup, but the expert presentation and visual magnetism on display work magic in drawing you in. Moments of wonder sneak up when you least expect them, framing a game of real artistic beauty: King Kong sleeping beside Ann as the sun silhouettes their figures at the opening of a sprawling cave is captivating.

Most the game involves attempting to escape the island through the first-person eyes of Jack Driscoll, who's joined by three helpful colleagues as colorful as they are helpful; Carl, a filmmaker charismatically voiced by Jack Black, is a kick to have around as he sets up his camera to capture the unfolding spectacle. There are only a few weapons to be found throughout the journey, and their limited ammunition cache often forces you to grab one of the many spears lying around for survival. The action is elegantly simple; you don't even need to aim that accurately to bag an enemy. It's the engaging rhythm and satisfying feel of the combat that makes it so much fun. And when you've cleared the brush of threats and must focus on lighting a fire to clear a path or find a peg to open a door, the narrow nature of the puzzle side of King Kong draws from that same keen sense of design that makes the game more than it might seem on the surface.





"It's a shame though that King Kong is content to stay on that narrow track"

It's a shame though that King Kong is content to stay on that narrow track the entire game without taking a turn for more variety. Michel Ancel has given us past special achievements in Rayman and Beyond Good & Evil, and here he has made a game that is less substantial and complete. But it's also a game that will likely prove more popular in the end, and well deserving of its success.

Brady Fiechter



King Kong 8.5 Score

Xbox 360 (reviewed), PS2, Xbox, PC

Fantastic atmosphere; doesn't feel like a typically rigid movie game.

Needs more visual variety; monotonous puzzles and enemy encounters.

Developer: Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Online: None **Available:** November

You can practically smell their putrid breath.

PERFECT DARK ZERO

Not so Perfect but I still love Mrs. Dark

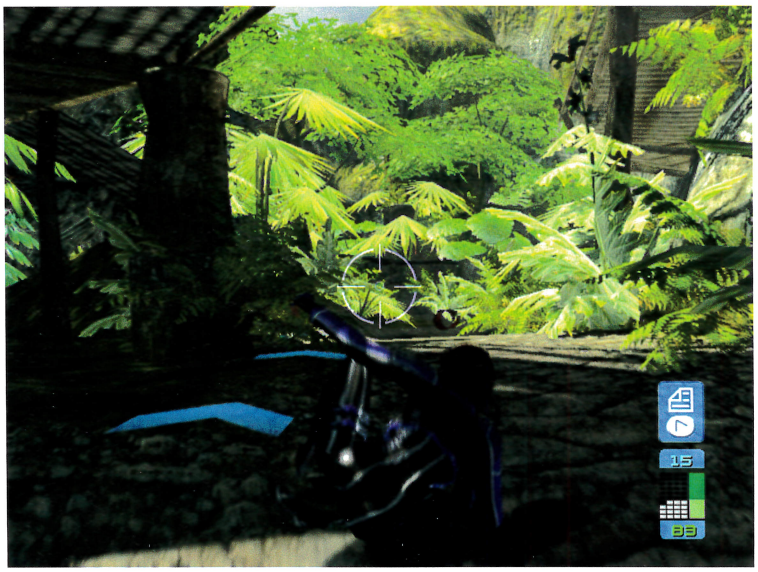


"...fans of online play have much to celebrate beyond the end credits."

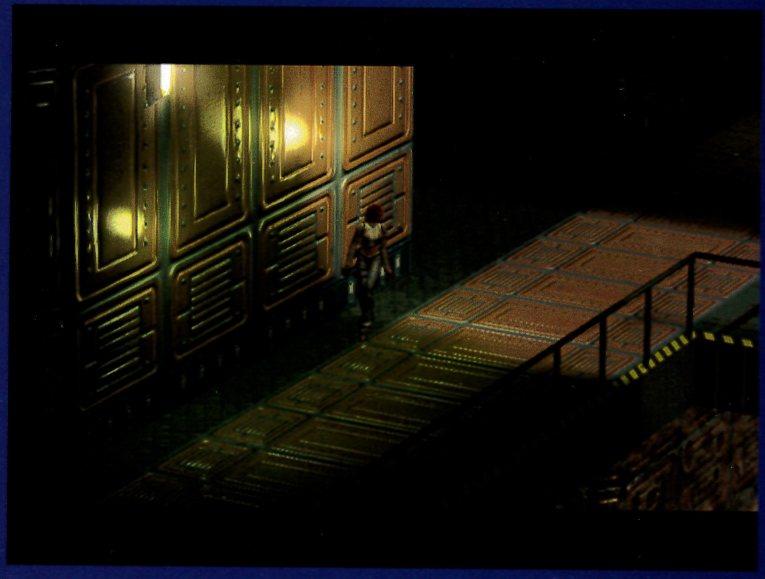
One could find fault with Perfect Dark Zero's disconnects such as Joanna's ability to withstand gunfire unscathed, clad only in tight jeans and a midriff-bearing half jacket, tree trunks that jettison from the ground like pencils rammed into a block of foam, shots to the head that emit the obligatory blood spray yet leave the victim 100% intact, or the fact that Joanna casts a shadow but has no legs or feet in first person, but you'll more likely be so enthralled in the stupefying visuals, intriguing (for the most part) mission-ops and over-the-top secret agent bravado that you won't even notice. As long as normal mapping retains its new car smell, fine detail hiccups such as these will likely go unnoticed, unless you're coming off of Kameo, in which case they stick out like a sore thumb. Otherwise, even though PDZ has nowhere near the attention to detail (transitional art is nonexistent—everything looks placed in the environments), for every miscue there are strides elsewhere that wash them away such as the Chronicles of Riddick-inspired flashes of third person during cover and dodging (although I wish they'd gone a step further and actually copied Riddick, as Joanna never climbs anything outside of ladders), the dual function weapons (especially later in the game when they start doling out fantasy weapons like the Super Dragon and CMP-150) and, although the game is devoid of cinemas until the bitter end, the story, which is surprisingly absorbing for being so cliché. I found other warts too, such as dead bodies that ricochet around the environment like ping pong balls should they fall into a spot of dodgy collision, little to no physics on water, screen tearing when rotating in highly lit or large areas, frame rate hitches in the pre-mission fly-bys, and moments where Joanna's father, Jack, literally stands in the line of fire like a malfunctioning android; but these still pale against the splendor elsewhere,













especially once the game kicks into high gear; I only wish it happened sooner. Things take so long to evolve that the precious few true "next-gen" missions are limited to the latter half of the game, beginning with Joanna's mission six river extraction, which introduces the game's first vehicle (an illegally fun to drive hovercraft), followed by Pacific Ocean, South America, and Africa stages that emphasize the kind of scope the next five years or so will bring…and then it's over, far too soon. Like the only other vehicle in the game—a brief stint in an assault suit—PDZ left me wanting more… more of the game's other underutilized devices such as the Camspy and Demo Kit, more bosses, more missions, and well, just more Joanna, although fans of online play have much to celebrate beyond the end credits. The extensive online and multiplayer components rival anything currently available and the co-op via split screen or system link (through local area network) offers a completely unique experience tuned for cooperative play.

If you strip away all the normal mapping and pretty textures, PDZ doesn't quite measure up to the likes of Metroid Prime, Halo, or The Chronicles of Riddick, but as a first-gen next-gen FPS it succeeds where it needs to most, dazzling us with heretofore unimaginable worlds, deep online components, and one spectacular franchise player. Microsoft's not big on first-party so we better be diggin' what we've got. I still contend that Rare's true calling (whether Microsoft likes it or not) is creating critter action games like Battletoads, Banjo & Kazooie, DKC, and now Kameo (the true star of the Xbox 360 launch), although something tells me the odds favor more Joanna Dark over a band of bipedal toads (*sniffle*). Dave Halverson

Perfect Dark Zero

8.0 Score

Xbox 360

Stunning texture work, phenomenal sound effects, great soundtrack, ultra-hot leading lady, intriguing missions.

Assorted hiccups, lack of fine detail, short single-player game, underutilized vehicles and devices.

Developer: Rare **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios
Online: Online multiplayer and 2-player co-op **Available:** November

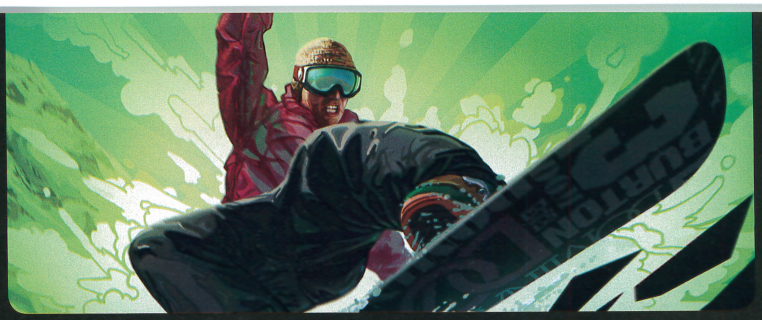




The CMP-150 doubles as a hologram. Now there's the game I want to play!

Amped 3

New hardware, same board



Amped 3 forgives all snowboarding sins. Its snow-covered rails are built with powerful board-attractant technology to snare riders who are off-course, allowing them the illusion of perfect control. Points are awarded for everything, even making sharp turns, and the games tricks have been idiot-proofed—even the slightest nudge on the Xbox 360's left analog stick causes a character to perform a special maneuver.

In return, 3 demands forgiveness for being over-the-top in its attempt to be wacky. Its cloying, heavy-handed stabs at humor fail majestically; somewhere between the sock puppets and the incessant pop-art scrapbooking montages with voiceovers by Misters Dum and Dummer, the game becomes a poorly worked self-parody. This is sandwich gameplay at its finest, where players are encouraged to express their creativity not with series of well-performed aerial acrobatics but with breads and luncheon meats. As in, go to the refrigerator young man while 3 tries to be funny.

There's a lot to like here, though, and its accessibility adds to the appeal. Open-ended play encourages exploration—it's fun just to plummet down the slopes trying to impress spectators—and neat park creation options allow for lots of creative fun. Which is, of course, snow small matter, pardon the horrible pun.

Amped 3 — Xbox 360 — **7.0** Score

- Exploration parts a nice touch; easy to pick up and play.
- Limp attempts at humor.

Developer: Indie Built **Publisher:** 2k Sports **Online:** None **Available:** September

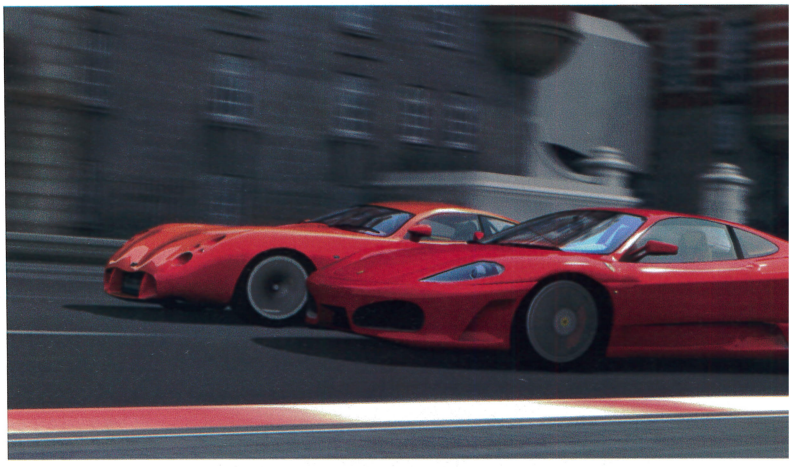




Project Gotham Racing

The finer art of racing







If you must single out one launch game that shows the potential of the Xbox 360, Project Gotham Racing could easily get the call. The game is stunning at first glance, growing more impressive by the track. It's not just the raw detail in the engine that dazzles. You start to really appreciate the impact of touches that have never been presented the same way before in racing game, like the awesome motion blur on the peripheral scenery. The view from the cockpit, which actually affects the way you play the game. The sheer detail of the surroundings, every object interacting with light sources for even more depth and realism. Racing games have become fairly predictable in most regards, but the visual presentation here does make it all seem like a step in a bold direction of immersion.

The game plays great too. The sense of speed is invigorating as you begin to master the tracks, and while veering away from hardcore sim territory and the type of options and push for technical mastery you might get in, say, Forza, it delivers satisfaction on its own terms. You'll no doubt be living online from the start, which makes Project Gotham Racing just that much more appealing. Racing fans are lucky this launch season. Brady Fiechter

Project Gotham Racing — Xbox 360 — **9.0** Score

- Such a treat to simply watch; the ability to stream your own music is a kick.
- Dynamic car damage would be nice.

Developer: Bizarre Creations **Publisher:** Microsoft **Online:** 8-player **Available:** November

GUN

Cowboy for a day





If I liked GUN more than I should, it's because I dig the idea of a game set in the old West. And, well, the game's just really damn good too. From the horse-ridden shootouts and gambling breaks to the river-boat massacre and deputy patrols, I was living the exciting life of a frontiersman. It's great playing a game that, in all the gamey trappings, felt removed from the norm.

The story follows Colton White, who's out for bloody revenge any way he can get it, which often means carving up cowboys and Indians in a brutally entertaining fashion. The action is swift and spot-on, with the engaging quickdraw system adding an extra touch of technique to the shooting. GUN isn't too difficult or complex, but it's really not about the action as much as it is adventuring through the nicely built settings, taking side missions and resolving your character's quest for redemption. The big surprise comes from the strength of the narrative, which crackles with snappy dialogue and characters that show real emotion. GUN delivers the Wild West goods.

Note: Obviously the Xbox 360 version is the one to get, but it comes as a big disappointment. It's one the least tweaked launch game, showing very little enhancements if anything at all.

Brady Fiechter

GUN — 8.0 Score

PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC, GC

Excellent story, action's simple and fun, horse segments rock.

Could use some visual help. More main sections and less side missions would have been welcome.

Developer: Neversoft **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** None
Available: November





Gauntlet

Seven Sorrows

Midway throws down the Gauntlet one more time



The forebear of arcade hack-and-slash (not to mention swarm) gameplay, as well as one of the most time-honored and lasting action franchises period, Midway continues to age Gauntlet well by somehow keeping with the times while staying true to its roots; no small task given such a rudimentary set of gameplay devices. For this latest crawl, Midway has again cast it just right, sticking to the game's core 1-4 player mold—purchasing spells, combos, and upgrades between levels—while honing the action and environments to a much more epic scale. Elf, Wizard, Warrior and Valkyrie are now larger, more detailed, painstakingly animated and in possession of some nicely refined skills doled out among the button cluster for specific results, from leaping sword attacks to shield breaks and air juggles that have you sweeping legions into the air to juggle with magic or consecutive strikes, or deposit into a pool of flames or other means of rapid disposal. Otherwise the song remains the same, with the undead spewing from portals like polygonal ant hills at a devastating rate, presenting that age old dilemma…the need to feed. But never fear! There's bound to be a fully cooked turkey in a chest somewhere (long live he who placeth thy turkeys). The most notable change outside of the shiny new digs and handmade cinemas are the bosses. Gone are those stationary behemoths that locked you into frustrating patterns like grand shooting piñatas, replaced by a wilier breed of abominations more akin to chasing you down to drain any remaining lives you may have dragged in with you. Dave Halverson



Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows — 8.0 Score

PlayStation 2, Xbox

It's Gauntlet through and through, packed with switches to be thrown puzzles to solve and medieval overtures that compel you to gnaw on large turkey legs. . . only polished to a glistening sheen.

Even all dressed up it's still somewhat repetitious.

Developer: Midway Home Ent. **Publisher:** Midway
Online: 1-4 player co-op **Available:** December 12



Review Gallery



Neopets

PlayStation 2

Developer: Idol Minds **Publisher:** Sony **Online:** None **Available:** November

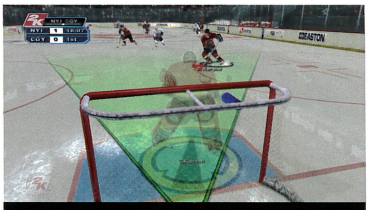
8.0 Score

Neopets may hearken back to a design style made famous by Spyro the Dragon, but it does so in a manner indicative of a national obsession, exuding all of the charm, wonder, and fairytale allure that the namesake embodies. This is where "generations" go out the window and gameplay takes center stage. If you have kids, buy it immediately and from now on anything like it. But the Darkest Faerie isn't strictly for kids. Anyone with a sense of wonder will surely revel in its storybook good vs. evil quest, pulling double duty as opposing forces, Tormund the Lupe Knight and Roberta the Acara Sorceress, fight for a common goal: self-preservation. TDF is the complete adventure package and then some, and it's not as sticky-sweet as you might think. Dave Halverson





"...the Darkest Faerie isn't strictly for kids."



NHL 2K6

Xbox 360

Developer: 2K Sports

Publisher: 2K Sports

Online: 8-player

Available: November

7.5 Score

NHL 2K6 came out on the other consoles for 20 bucks. This Xbox 360 version, with its minimal visual upgrades and decidedly non-next-gen quality, is 60 bucks. You make the call. As for the game itself, it's actually a superb hockey simulation, offering a huge amount of options, top-tier gameplay, perfectly responsive controls, excellent sound—pretty much everything the best hockey game out there needs to sit at the top. The passing system feels better than ever, and thanks to tweaked AI, your teammates seem like they're more properly involved in scoring and playing defense. I haven't enjoyed a hockey game this much in a long time (it's just cheaper on the original Xbox.) Brady Fiechter



NBA 2K6

Xbox 360

Developer: Visual Concepts

Publisher: 2K Sports

Online: 8-player

Available: November

8.0 Score

NBA 2K6 came out on the other consoles for 20 bucks. This Xbox 360 version is 60 bucks and plays exactly like the cheaper versions. But wait: unlike NHL 2K6, this one's been visually juiced, and it looks awesome. Players sweat. Jerseys ripple. Animations on the players are amazingly varied and detailed. It's just too bad the same level of attention wasn't given to everything that surrounds the court... It may all look a little plastic, but start to sink into the flow of a game and you begin to really appreciate the finer points of the presentation that take what was already a tremendously deep basketball game to another level. If you don't own a hi-def television, the steep price hike probably isn't worth it, but for the rest... Brady Fiechter



Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

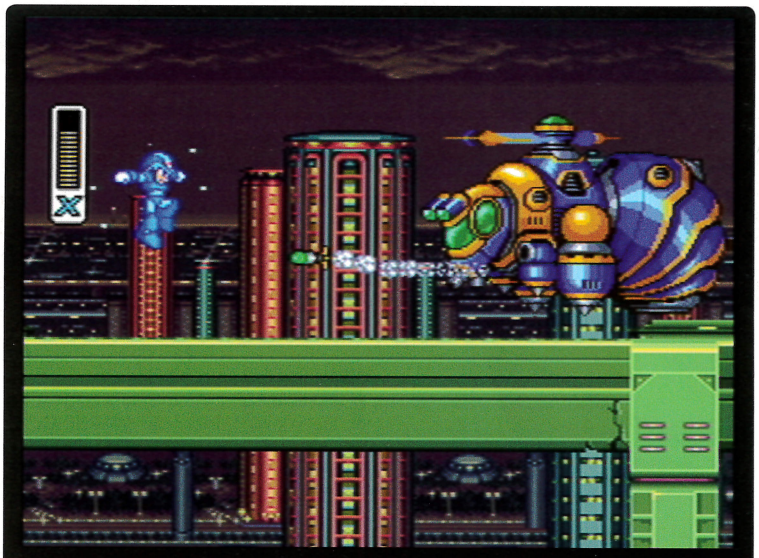
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: EA **Publisher:** EA **Online:** None **Available:** November

7.5 Score

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire is a highly polished, drop-dead gorgeous, by-the-numbers scripted action game brought to you in stunning detail, exuding the mood and gothic allure of the film almost perfectly. After choosing Hermione, Harry, the awkwardly pubescent Ron (or all three in co-op), disciples set about the business of dispensing nightmare creatures by collecting Bertie Bott's Every-Flavor Beans to activate cards that bolster the trio's casting and defensive powers as they combine spells, charms and jinxes to take on a cauldron of film-endemic missions, including some eye-catching encounters with the Hungarian Horntail dragon. The trio's animations are somewhat limited and they skate a bit making for some clumsy moments, but otherwise Goblet's a fine, if not predictable, bit of movie gaming. DH

"...Goblet's a fine, if not predictable, bit of movie gaming."



Mega Man X Collection

PlayStation, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Online:** None **Available:** January 10

8.0 Score

This is truly one for the ages, especially if you just can't get enough of the blue bomber. If nothing else, it's a fascinating trip down memory lane watching the X series slowly come into its own, transitioning from the 1993 original all the way to X6 in 2001. The first notable leap comes with X3, with its luxurious anime intro, faster gameplay and the introduction of Zero, followed by X4 (the turning point in the series) with its scripted dialogue and scrolling foregrounds. The biggest milestone for me, though, has to be X5 because...he finally ducked! So what if he looked like a Power Ranger; after a decade-plus of rigid knees I didn't care if he was pink. All 6 games (and one bonus) still stand as some of the best and most challenging of 2D gaming, starring one of the most revered characters in the gaming universe. Dave Halverson



Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

Xbox 360

Developer: Neversoft **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** None **Available:** November

7.5 Score

While this is the best version of AW, as a 360 game it pales to the extent that I can't believe Microsoft allowed it on the console. The game's Achilles' heel is its wooden character design and models: they look even worse in HD (on a console you buy to get away from ugly seams, distorted visages and poly-clones), although the T. Hawk faithful have never seemed to sweat the details, opting instead to bask in its epic skating arenas, which is where this 7th installment excels. The BMX riding and create-a-modes are welcome diversions but, while immense, the classic and story modes feel like additional swats to the proverbial dead horse (now withered close to bone). Maybe it's time to teach this dog some new tricks and enter the realm of hub-based platforming with fantasy elements. Now that'd be something. Dave Halverson



Super Mario Strikers

GameCube

Developer: Next Level Games **Publisher:** Nintendo **Online:** None **Available:** December

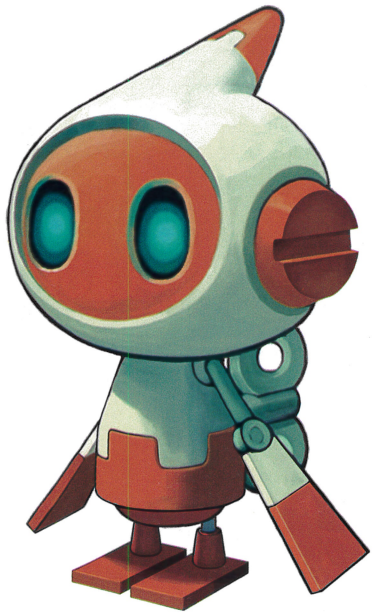
8.5 Score

Super Mario Strikers throws everything onto the pitch for a fast and frantic experience that will leave you laughing. Developed in Canada by Next Level Games, this is by far the craziest Mario sports title yet and I had a blast with it. This is a soccer game of no fouls and no out-of-bounds so the action never stops. Through various intricacies of the play mechanics, your team can earn power-ups to unleash and they bring so much fun and chaos. Turtle shells, banana peels, bombs, etc. can be used to throw your opponent for a loop while you charge for the goal or fight for the ball. There are also big flashy Super Strike shots which require you to use a golf-swing-type meter to blast a perfect shot. Very good times. Michael Hobbs

"This is by far the craziest Mario sports title yet and I had a blast with it."

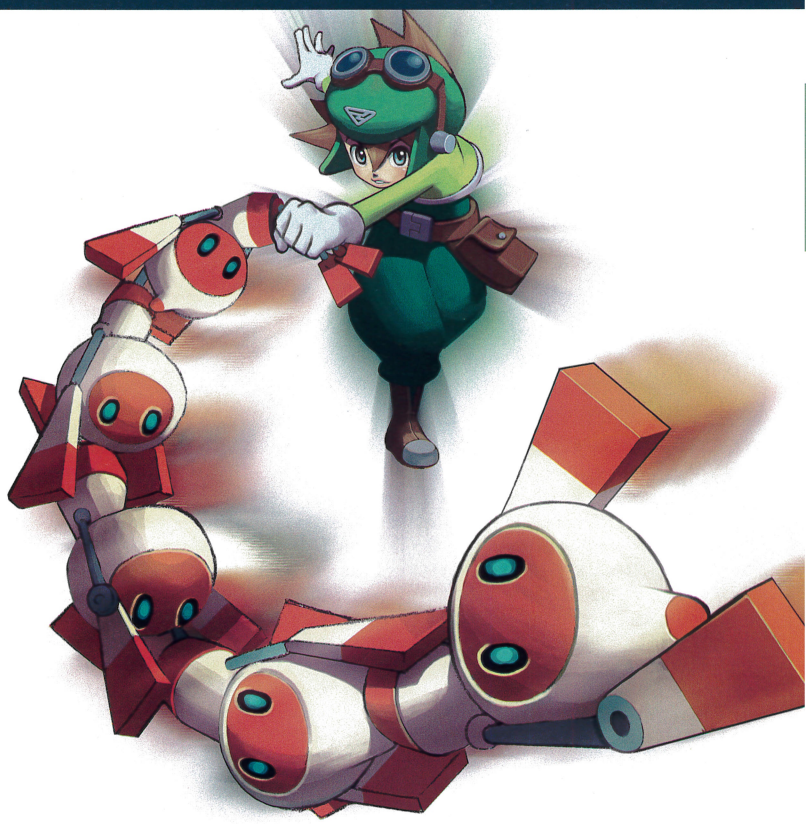
Tokobot

Everyone should have one!



Tecmo's first entry into the now bustling PSP market should come with the following disclaimer: WARNING: Prolonged use of this product may cause sleeplessness and an insatiable fondness for holding hands in large crowds...or something along those lines. If producer Keisuke Kikuchi (Deception, Fatal Frame) set out to create something as magnetic as Katamari Damacy or Lumines, yet infinitely more attractive and immersive, than he has certainly succeeded; at least in my book.

Tokobot takes place on Moritari, an island paradise where an advanced prehistoric civilization once thrived in perfect harmony with nature and the universe by means of a device called the Eternal Engine, until they mysteriously and suddenly slipped away. Thousands of years later a new society has blossomed on the site, dotted with research labs dedicated to exploring the region to tap its superior technology, which is where we find Bolt, a young rookie adventurer who stumbles on an undiscovered little robot dubbed Karakuri (a.k.a. Tokobots) that, for some reason, only he can control. Sent back to the ruin (aided by his bubbly but down to business operator, Ruby) to gather more data on the Tokobots' origins, Bolt soon discovers that the cataclysmic event that once decimated the civilization has once again been set in motion, and so off he and the Tokobots go to save the world.



"Tecmo has shown once again that it doesn't take mega licenses or millions of dollars to make a great video game"





Bolt and a small team of Tokobots ponder what lies ahead...or perhaps behind.

The means of progression (and addiction) in Tokobot, where the tiny Bolt must negotiate immense and complex ruins marked by hieroglyphics and ledges called magnets, comes by way of Joint Actions—the ability to form Tokobots into propellers for flight or ladders and bridges; use them to whip enemies into submission or morph them into catapults, tanks and even one seriously cool mech—a talent that Kikuchi-san exploits to the max. The more Tokobots, the more layers of gameplay he piles on between frequent breaks for the mini-games du jour, designed to test your skills for the work ahead. Remember** how hooked you became on Abe and his chanting buddies? Well, it's like that, only more action-packed; making Tokobots is the best thing to happen to tactical action and platforming since Bubba 'n' Stix. And although nobody knows what the hell that is, trust me, it was (and is) one amazing fusion of action and tactics. Google it and be enlightened.

Tecmo has shown once again that it doesn't take mega licenses or millions of dollars to make a great video game; in fact, it's becoming painfully obvious that the exact opposite applies. Originality and superior design will always win over commercial appeal, at least where great gameplay is concerned. Tokobot is a requisite purchase for your PSP as much as it is a reason to go out and buy one.
Dave Halverson

Tokobot — PSP — **9.0** Score

- Beautiful graphics, great music and very addictive gameplay that never stands still.
- I'm sure they'll find a way to fill in that remaining .5 in the sequel.

Developer: Tecmo **Publisher:** Tecmo
Multiplayer: NA **Available:** December

Legend of Heroes
A Tear of Vermillion

Falcom is alive and well, doing their thing on PSP

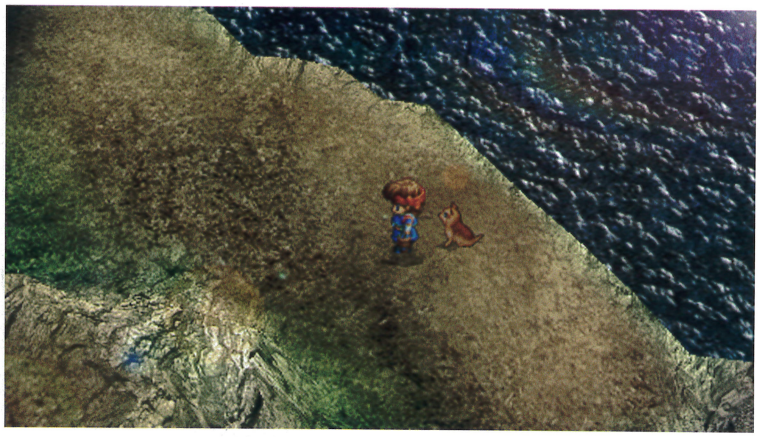
This is the kind of game I think people had in mind when they plunked down 200 bones for their PSP. Legend of Heroes really is something special, especially if you like Falcom's brand of turn-based RPG; long in the tooth, big on plot and character development and bathed in hyper-detailed hand-drawn art. The gameplay model here is nothing new—running from town to town and often back again while engaging the enemy in turn-based exchanges commanding your party to attack, use magic, skills, items etc. The difference is in the presentation in nearly every facet of the game. Both on the field and in towns, LoH is big on events—with exchanges lasting up to 3-5 minutes—and character development, so expect your money's worth of cliché, yet extremely well-devised dialogue. The battles, although standard issue, are fresh baked too, based on casting White and Black magic, Area of Effect, Speed Stats, and the "Deadly" gauge which, once full, allows for a single devastating attack; great for wiping out clusters of attackers. I also appreciate that everything is animated, so rather than waving an arm to deal an attack from afar, the characters actually engage in melee. The magic effects are appropriately luminous too, if not surprisingly so (the entire game features spectacular particle effects), as is the addition of a pet (bunny, dog, or cat) to care for in your travels. A happy pet pays valuable dividends that could make the difference in many a key exchange. Falcom also make the monsters/confrontations visible and easy to dodge on the fields so if you're adequately leveled up you don't have to worry about needless interruptions when you're trying to get somewhere quick, and there's a fair amount of backtracking to be done for sure.

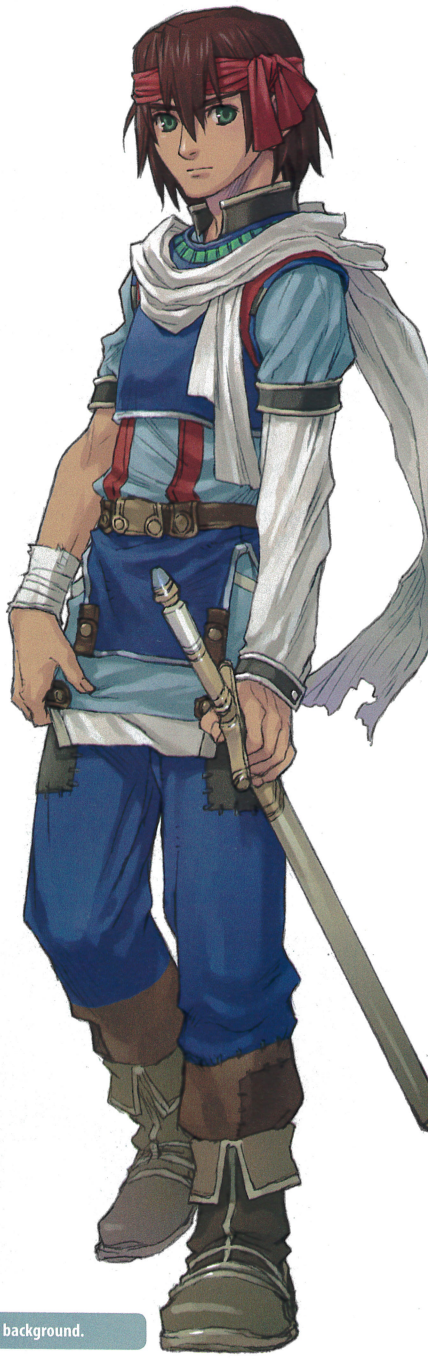
"Both on the field and in towns, LoH is big on events... and character development."

Where the game stumbles (how much depending on personal preference) is in its slightly limited number of locales, divided between plains, mountains, towns, and dungeons, which, although highly detailed, tend to look similar for the first half of the 45-50 hour game (although the final dungeon is brilliant) and the contrast between the anime style stills used for dialogue and the pudgy SD sprites used in the game. Personally I like SD sprites, although these don't compare to the likes of Disgaea's; the reigning king of the dying art. I'd have liked to see more epic boss encounters too. Big baddies are few and far between, but given the human element in the game I suppose that is to be expected. I'm just thrilled to have this level of RPG appearing on the system rigged with console accoutrements but undeniably PSP visuals. There are few sights as pleasing as a widescreen, ultra hi-res Falcom style RPG on PSP. Dave Halverson









Legend of Heroes: A Tear of Vermillion — **8.0** Score

PSP

Deep compelling story, visible monsters on the field, engaging battles, brilliant particle effects, highly detailed hand-drawn.

Slight lack of diversity, pudgy sprites an acquired taste, and moments of overly fruity dialogue.

Developer: Falcom **Publisher:** Bandai Games
Multiplayer: NA **Available:** November

Lower left: Avin in his anime form with his "SD" form in the background.

Untold Legends

The Warrior's Code

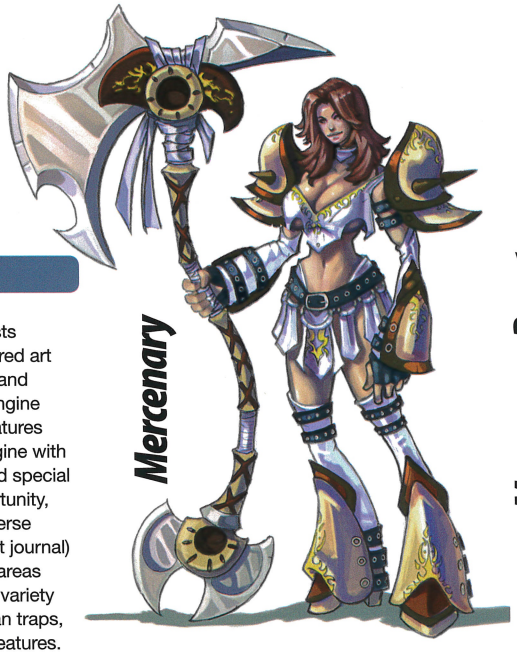
SOE's top-down powerhouse gets a manga-licious makeover

There's no question that Brotherhood of the Blade was a formidable installment in the Untold Legends Saga, however, there is also no denying that it lacked originality and loaded forever, two offenses indicative of a launch title that SOE intend to not only rectify but pretty much archive as they've seen fit to alter their very tried and extremely true formula—even they could have gotten a lot more miles out of it—the results of which had this reviewer dancing an awkward but earnest jig. Why? Because I LOVE top-down action and adventure but I've never seen a category languish in similitude for such a long time outside of first-person shooting, which broke out of its mold (more like shackles) briefly with The Chronicles of Riddick, only to climb right back into the hole like John Goodman at the end of Raising Arizona.

SOE haven't merely tweaked the mold; they've pretty much run it over with an H2 load of Krispy Kreme enthusiasts beginning with a new manga-inspired art style (I feel another jig coming on) and a completely new and improved engine to support a laundry list of new features including an improved combat engine with a wider variety of moves, upgraded special abilities, dynamic attacks of opportunity, and new spell effects. Over 30 diverse quests (complete with a new quest journal) will span 45 all-new hand-crafted areas featuring dynamic events, a wider variety of interactive objects, Machiavellian traps, destructible walls, and ambient creatures.

"SOE haven't merely tweaked the mold; they've pretty much run it over with an H2 load of Krispy Kreme enthusiasts."

And to celebrate all this newfound diversity, five new characters with shape changing abilities, enhanced customization and a wider variety of animations will square off against 12 massive bosses housed within interactive lairs. As gorgeous as SOE's characters always are, they have always been extremely limited in terms of movement—lacking variations on running, walking and attacking, so this is especially great news for PSP owners eager to get their hands on first-party system exclusives. The PSP is on the move. Dave Halverson









Unaltered beast: The Mercenary in her human form

Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code
Preview
PSP

Point of Interest
I actually have no idea how to dance a jig.

Developer: Sony Online Ent. **Publisher:** Sony Online Ent.
Available: March





Infected

PSP — 8.0 Score

Developer: Planet Moon **Publisher:** Majesco **Multiplayer:** 1-8 **Available:** November

Be of bad cheer as this year's Christmas in the Big Crapple offers not just foul, ill-smelling, and possibly drunk street-corner Santas, but rather foul, ill-smelling, and possibly drunk street-corner Santas infected with a nasty virus making them seek human flesh.

As a special operative, it's your job to dispatch Crazy Saint Nick and New York's zombie hordes in the third-person perspective. The small twist here has you softening up foes with shots from one gun and dispatching them with blasts from another; weakened enemies in close proximity to one another will be linked by pulsing crimson strands and can be destroyed en masse with one blast. With this, the game subtly shifts from a straightforward, almost mindless, blast-'em-up into the realm of a strategic shooter. The mechanic works extremely well, and the challenge becomes not just to kill them all, but to waste them in grand fashion.

"...and possibly drunk street-corner Santas infected with a nasty virus making them seek human flesh."

Although its inanely pounding rock soundtrack and lukewarm humor win Infected no Brownie points, it does provide suitable niceties in terms of customizable characters, multiplayer options, and upgradable weaponry. It's a bloody good time, and not even the most diseased, blood-crazed Santa Claus would put it on his naughty list. **Greg Orlando**







The Lord of the Rings: Tactics

PSP — 4.5 Score

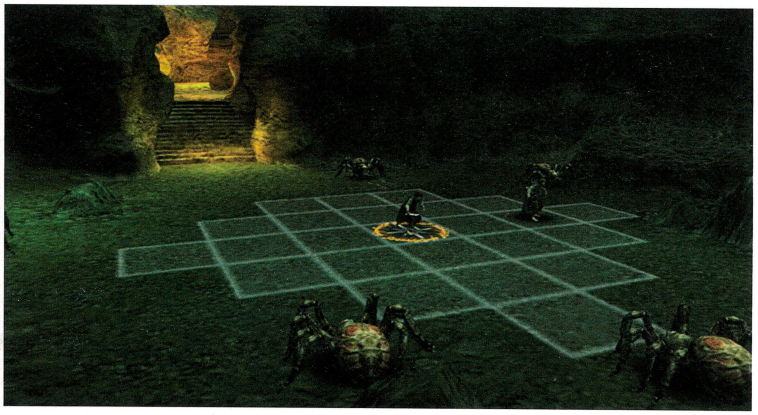
Developer: EA **Publisher:** EA **Multiplayer:** 1-4 **Available:** November

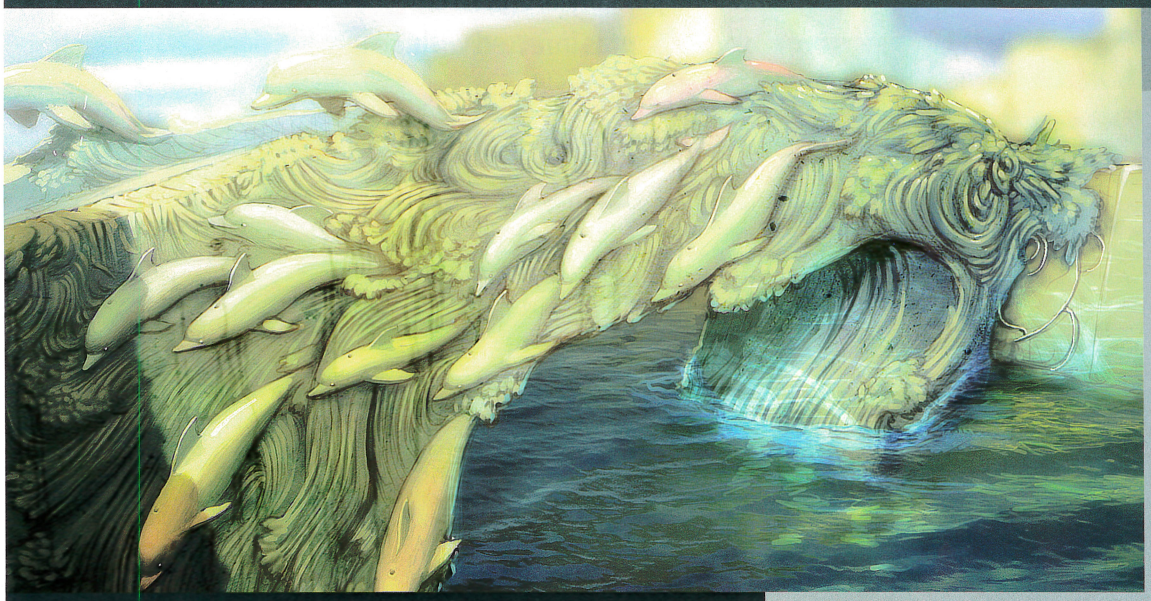
J.R.R. Tolkien's cash cow gets propped up for another milking with the turn-based RPG The Lord of the Rings: Tactics and, yes, there is smoke coming from its udders. With Tactics, it's possible to fight battles across Middle Earth, to play as the good guys or the villains, and to take the high ground in order to obtain a strategic advantage. What's missing is a soul and some basic elements integral to the Lord of the Rings mythos, such as a story. The result is wholly sanitized, a paint-by-number RPG with beloved characters and settings slapped on it.

Missions are preceded by clips from The Lord of the Rings films, providing the flimsiest of rationales for the fighting. There's no context, no sense of who these characters are other than pawns to be moved around the chessboard, and no feeling of momentum save for the progression of a hero's statistics. Liberties are taken with the license to allow, say, hobbits Sam and Frodo to stand with the big boys in combat. The game, however, also gleefully stomps over its source material when it allows these same tiny hobbits to impede the path of a huge and insanely powerful Balrog. **Greg Orlando**











Atmospheric effects draw you into dense landscapes.

Preview

Neverwinter Nights 2

Equal parts campaign and creation





BioWare's original Neverwinter Nights was an enormously popular RPG. Based in the beloved D&D fantasy universe of Forgotten Realms (home to R.A. Salvatore's dark elf hero, Drizzt Do'Urden), NWN introduced an incredibly flexible campaign creation toolset. The title gathered a huge mod community, and fans are still producing new adventures to this day. Fully tasked with developing the Neverwinter Nights sequel, Obsidian knew that although a mod element was essential in NWN 2, ultimately more players would come for the single player campaign. Thus, in the sequel both elements have been allotted similar resources and attention.

Obsidian's last game was KOTOR 2, and the character development in NWN 2 will borrow from that game's influence system. Your companions will have unique personalities motivating their behavior. Over the course of the game, from your decidedly non-heroic origins in a filthy bog town, the decisions you make will either please your companions or cause them to question your judgment—perhaps eventually turning them away or against you. You'll also discover more about your companions as you earn or lose their confidence, leading to revelations about your swampy hometown…the scene of a world-changing battle in ages past.

The D&D 3.5 rules gel very nicely with video game RPG systems, emphasizing a smooth character progression arc instead of pushing too many critical choices early on. This style of advancement should be compelling within NWN 2's influence system; you may find yourself choosing an outcome you don't necessarily agree with, simply to gain favor with a companion that has become a serious asset in battle.

NWN 2 uses an all-new engine, dubbed "Electron". The goal is fantasy world ambience, and initial impressions suggest they've nailed it. It's actually very powerful kit for an RPG engine, covering world objects with normal maps and height-adjusted textures, blooms and depth of field working their magic to draw broad, dreamy fantasy landscapes. Mod makers will be given surprising access to the engine. Weather, cloud patterns, wind speed, colors, lighting, terrain, cinematics, dialogue and movement scripts are all controllable in the editor, and you can even spread the toolset across multiple monitors.

Like any title with a built-in community, the pressure is on Obsidian to get this sequel right. This is a team of RPG veterans, pre-dating KOTOR 2 with core ex-staffers from Black Isle during Interplay's RPG heyday. If they're confident that Neverwinter Nights 2 is going to win over the core fan base and provide general RPG players with a killer campaign, we can't wait to see how right they are. **Mike Griffin**

Neverwinter Nights 2
PC
Preview

Point of Interest

Warlocks will debut as a base class in NWN 2. Thanks to inherent abilities, they don't exhaust their magic.

Developer: Obsidian Entertainment **Publisher:** Atari
Online: Multiplayer Campaign **Available:** 2006

"…discover more about your companions as you earn or lose their confidence, leading to revelations…"



Progress Report

RF Online

Approaching the final countdown





Interview
Ed Blincoe, Product Manager, Codemasters

RF Online continues to mesmerize gamers in Korea, Japan and the Philippines and Codemasters is working double-time to prepare the game for western gamers. We caught up with RF's product manager, Ed Blincoe, for a progress report.

play: How is the localization process going?

Ed: Localization is going well. All the strings have now been translated and we're in the process of having these implemented by CCR. We'll have our first look at the Codemasters localised RF Online any day now.

How are you going to market RF Online's image to western audiences?

We're preserving RF's image as much as we can. The game and it's content are anime in style and western audiences are very much into this scene. If anything, we're playing up to that style as it brings in a much broader audience.

We've seen many Asian territory content updates for RF. How will that content migrate to the western game?

Everything that happens to the game in Korea will get transferred over to the US/UK version of the game. We'll be kicking off our pay service with the big Giga 3 update—which is one update behind the Korean service. Later, we're planning to update our players on a regular basis with the services running pretty much parallel—aside from small localization timeframes—over the next 18 months. The Giga updates are free of charge and patch automatically into the game as it's started up.

A couple of reader questions: What kind of world transportation system will RF Online use?

A mixture of highly developed technology and magic gives all the races access to teleportation systems for instant travel to all the major city hubs. In addition to this, there are shuttlecraft that can be used in real time allowing you to meet fellow passengers and the ability fly over far greater distances reaching far distant areas of the planet that have no teleportation systems.

How are you balancing magic users versus pure technology users, in terms of offensive and defensive capabilities?

This is always going to be a difficult task. I expect nobody knew what would happen the first time a magic wielding Cora came up against a Bellato Mechrider in a fully armed battle mech. Of course, there are minor imbalances in power as the races gain new skills. But the game has been through extensive global testing and we are incredibly happy with the current race and skill balance. Evidence of this can be seen through the Core War victory reports, as the victorious race changes very often.

Thanks, Ed.

"...Giga updates are free of charge and patch automatically into the game as it's started up."



art by: **james ashwood**

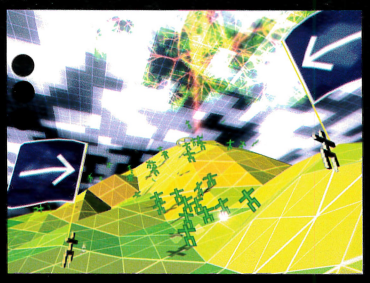
Preview

Darwinia

Always bet on green

Introversion buzz spilled over into the mainstream this year with the limited-run UK release of Darwinia, the independent developer's second effort after Uplink, their cult-hit hacker sim. Darwinia is a one-of-a-kind strategy and action hybrid that has all the character and inimitable qualities of the best games, packaged in some very stimulating—and completely unorthodox—sound and imagery. It's also very addicting. When Valve announced that they had partnered with Introversion to release Darwinia over Steam, representatives stated quite simply: "After playing the game around the office, there didn't seem to be a reason why a game as great as Darwinia wasn't available to gamers worldwide." We couldn't agree more.

The first UK release of Darwinia employed a gesture-based command system where players would draw simple shapes on screen to summon units. It was functional and unique, yet extraneous somehow within the experience. Chris Delay, Introversion's lead designer, spotted this discrepancy too. The latest version of Darwinia features excellent new icon-based commands that mimic the gesture system's minimalism while adding reliability. Every element of Darwinia's basic control is streamlined, whether assembling the electronic essence of enemies or guiding units across islands and into firing range. Controlling the Death Squad unit essentially transforms the game into a mini-shooter; you patrol the gridwork with Robotron-esque centurions, blasting virus creatures left and right with lasers, grenades and missiles (all upgradeable). Perhaps most crucial to any of this working: the game consistently has very good level design.



"Darwinia really has to be seen and heard in motion…to fully appreciate how effective the presentation is."

Darwinia really has to be seen and heard in motion, with all elements active, to fully appreciate how effective the presentation is. The game has a massive ambient soundscape mixed in up to 7.1 surround and mellow, crunchy C64-inspired tunes. Those fractal hills you see in the screenshots are positively radiant in game, informed by subtle pixel glows and perfect light specularity. The colors are remarkably pure. These are modern video game graphics free of contemporary contrivance—comfortably oblivious to current standards, skillfully stylized to communicate the atmosphere of the world to the player. If you like Robotron X, Tempest 2000, or Rez…you will find sanctuary in Darwinia. Normal maps need not apply.

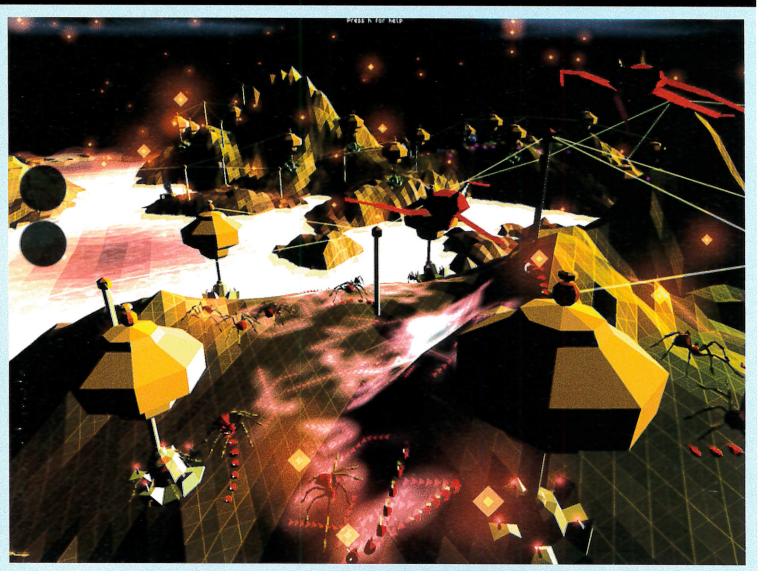
There's another side to Darwinia that adds a great deal of allure: a rather poignant story with a cool, existential vibe. You'll learn about the Darwinian soul, and how these little AI entities perceive their world. It's all restrained, surreal and one more reason you need to play Darwinia. **Mike Griffin**

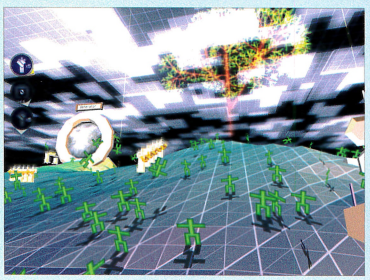
Darwinia — PC — **8.5** Score

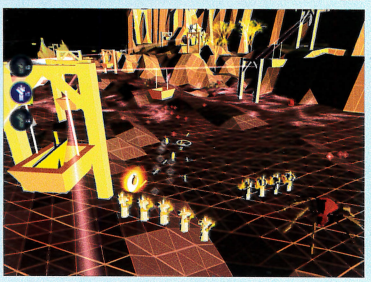
+ Totally unique, from theme to presentation. Units are fun to upgrade and control. Mad bargain through Steam at $20.

− Darwinians scatter a little too easily during big moves. Really intense action will chug on weaker PCs.

Developer: Introversion Software **Publisher:** Valve (Steam)
Online: None **Available:** December







Preview

Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45

Blowing up the Russian front



Tripwire Interactive…who? The UK-based indie development house isn't well known outside of the mod scene just yet, but that's all going to change in late January when Tripwire's first person action title Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45 goes on sale through Steam. Tripwire was in the spotlight a couple of years ago when they won grand prize in the million-dollar "Make Something Unreal" contest. Beyond the welcome exposure for Red Orchestra, an excellent Unreal mod, the win also gave the team full access to the latest Unreal Engine 2.5 and also a complete Unreal Engine 3 license. Tripwire moved into some proper digs, welcomed new members, added the Ostfront 41-45 moniker, and Red Orchestra's retail-quality update commenced—rousing multiplayer action driving every decision. All told, the progress was enough to warrant a phone call from Valve and an invitation to be published over Steam. As with other titles under Steam's indie model, and unlike mainstream publishing, Tripwire Interactive also retains full ownership of property in the deal.

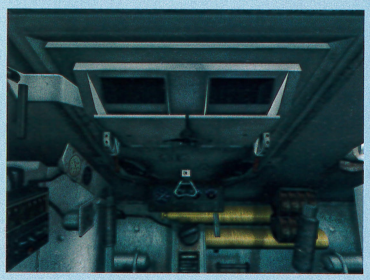
Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45 continues to harness the 2.5 edition of the Unreal engine, but it has matured well beyond its humble modified origins. The team can now invoke the power of core engine code—a component yanked from the mod tools for security reasons. The result is thirteen big production environments on the Russian WW2 front with massive infantry and vehicle combat. And unlike the basic vehicle window slots seen in most wartime FPS titles, each of Red Orchestra's 14 vehicles has full simulation-grade interior modeling.

Though WW2 authenticity is commendable, it is Red Orchestra's dynamic player movement that we're most excited about. RO's troops will dive forward to prone position while on the move. They will hustle and sprint while crouching. Diving right over obstacles (or even out of windows) will be par for the shell-shocked course. Ledges, sandbags and tables can be used by snipers to set-up their rifles with added stability. Infantry toting the heaviest machine guns can lean against walls to steady their fierce ordnance. Keep in mind: all this dynamic movement and interaction is expressly balanced for wild online multiplayer games—up to 32 players—with 28 different weapons in the mix and loads of armored vehicles tearing across the map.

> "…it is Red Orchestra's dynamic player movement that we're most excited about."

Rarely seen: fully-modeled FPS vehicle interiors







Gameplay was the deciding factor in Tripwire's Unreal contest victory, and it's also the reason why Valve—familiar, as it were, with good gameplay—signed them to Steam. After a year of pure multiplayer refinement under a healthy budget, Red Orchestra is poised to make a big impact in the genre. **Mike Griffin**

Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45 — Preview

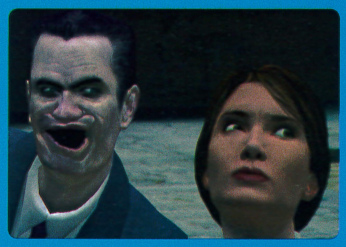
PC

Point of Interest

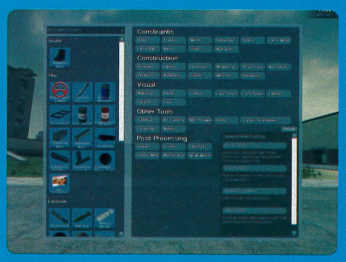
Following RO's completion, Tripwire will begin working on a future title using the Unreal Engine 3.

Developer: Tripwire Interactive **Publisher:** Valve (Steam)
Online: 32 players **Available:** January

Garry's Mod v. 9.4

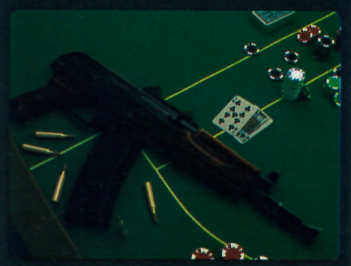


Imagine a mad scientist's lab of Half-Life 2 parts: spawn any asset, pose ragdolls in any physical or facial position, add wheels, thrusters or even hot air balloons to any object, make NPCs fight and build forts online with your buds. The latest version of Garry's Mod, an endlessly entertaining Half-Life 2 modification by Team Garry, improves on the aforementioned features while adding a completely revamped menu. It's one of the finest HL 2 mods around, and it's free. Browse to: gmod.garry.tv.



A vast palette of objects, physics and fun.

GoldenEye: Source



Merry Christmas, GoldenEye fans. Cyber Genetic Studios, an enterprising crew of programmers and artists, is remaking Rare's classic N64 shooter in the Source (HL 2) engine. A multiplayer alpha build will be available for download December 25th. Play it now (goldeneyesource.com), before someone pulls the plug…

Postscript

White Birds fly to Paradise

Benoit Sokal is known for his great work on the atmospheric adventure series Syberia, and he's back at it with Paradise—arriving on PC via Ubisoft in February. Sokal's new company, White Birds, will handle development. The game follows a young woman's trek across a re-imagined, fantastical Africa. Paradise intends to blend exploration with puzzles and action gameplay. Sokal is quite good at pacing these sorts of adventure titles and the exotic artwork looks superb.





Superior PSP media management



We've used various media software to transfer music and movie files into PSP format, but it's frequently a complicated affair, or the interface is too cluttered, or you simply can't do everything you need to do within one program. Enter Sony's new PSP Media Manager. Developed by the same media division responsible for Sony's ACID music software, the PSP Media Manager is now our go-to software for all PSP-related media transfers on PC. Rip CD and DVD files into optimized PSP format, search and import podcast feeds, and back up PSP game saves to your PC. Media Manager also supports every popular music and movie format. The interface is incredibly easy to navigate, and it handles PSP docking (via USB) elegantly. This is straightforward, attractive software that improves your PSP experience. Comes with a free USB cable in stores, or available online at sonymediasoftware.com.

NPD PC Game Sales

Week of Nov. 13 - Nov. 19, 2005

01. MS Age Of Empires III - Microsoft
02. Civilization IV - 2K Games (Take 2)
03. Call Of Duty 2 - Activision
04. Star Wars Battlefront II - LucasArts
05. World Of Warcraft - Vivendi Universal
06. The Sims 2 Nightlife Expansion Pack - Electronic Arts
07. The Sims 2 - Electronic Arts
08. Harry Potter & The Goblet Of Fire - Electronic Arts
09. The Movies - Activision
10. Battlefield 2 - Electronic Arts

Ex-Blizzard staff launch new studio (again)



Another team of ex-Blizzard North staffers, Hyboreal Games, has announced its presence. Hyboreal is currently working on Project Starfall, a sci-fi action title. Team members include Michio Okamura, Lead Artist on Diablo and Creative Lead on the final Blizzard North project (cough, Diablo 3?), Eric Sexton, a Diablo 1 and 2 design lead that handled story-based quests and co-created the random item system, and Steven Woo, an ace programmer who designed most of Diablo 2's interface and expandable quest systems. Sounds like a recipe for future success.

Zero Point introduces next-gen FPS

Denmark's Zero Point Software has announced Project IM, an Unreal Engine 3-powered next-gen shooter for PC, 360 and PS3. This sci-fi themed FPS will place you in the role of a futuristic Special Forces soldier. IM is expected to include Arcade, RPG and Tactical game modes, and at least one mode will include randomly generated elements. Managing director of Zero Point, Nicolai Gronborg told Play that prior to the release of a three-minute trailer in early '06, information on IM will be sparse. However, when pressed about the game's four-player co-op mode, Nicolai said, "One thing I can reveal about the cooperative mechanics is this: the entire game, its story and features, has been designed with cooperative in mind from day one." That's good news for fans of co-op gameplay in their FPS titles. Project IM is one to watch.



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01.06

These are the good times. My favorite eras in gaming are generally those in-between platforms, when the best of the current generation is being released, as anticipation simultaneously builds for the next. Japan has an embarrassment of current-gen savoriness lined up over the next few months: Rogue Galaxy, Ryu Ga Gotoku, Kingdom Hearts II, MGS3 Subsistence, Dirge of Cerberus, Okami, Suikoden V, Shin Onimusha, Phantasy Star Universe, Final Fantasy XII. While the Japan-exclusive sweetmeats for the Xbox360 are scant (Ninety-Nine Nights and [eM] will release in Japan first, and that's about it), we look forward to increased developer support for the platform in the months and years to come. Though Bill's second 'Box will unquestionably see greater success here, our money's still on the PS3 as the numerical victor in the Japanese platform wars.

While we're on the topic, I'd like take a moment to address a few of the PS3 rumors swirling about the Japanese game industry. It costs ¥2,000,000,000 and takes four years to make a single game! The system will launch at ¥250,000! Games will retail for ¥12,000! No fabrication center in the world can mass-produce the Cell processor! It's been delayed two years! The patent absurdity of this gossip may be amusing, but it can't be denied that insiders are in an absolute fit about the PS3 potentially destroying the game industry. The common claim is that only the most gigantic developers will be able to make games for the machine, and that due to higher production costs the number of titles per year will be vastly reduced. What does this spell? The death knell for the struggling Japanese game industry? Legions of developers moving to handheld? An outpouring of love for the 360 and/or Revolution? Perhaps. But let's not forget that pundits were saying the exact same things before the PS2 launch, and that platform ended up selling 96 million units worldwide. Sony may certainly see loss of market share this generation, particularly in the west, but a dominant Xbox360 in Japan seems like an impossibility from where I'm sitting. With that said, only time will tell, and I look forward to the Japanese 360 launch (at press time, still ten days away). Expect a Japanese release day report next issue.



< **Nick Des Barres**

This month Nick took a trip up north to Nagano to visit a friend and sample the local soba, said to be the best in Japan. Though he made the soba his, and it was indeed the finest he had ever tasted, transcending mere buckwheat to become something semidivine, it was here Nick learned yet another valuable lesson about life in Japan. Don't stand on the mossy rocks in the middle of a river with a $1200 digital camera that you don't even technically own. Because you'll slip and fall in. And drown the camera. And get saddled with a $450 repair bill. In other news, he's twiddling his thumbs, absentmindedly fondling his newly-purchased-on-credit 1080p Sharp AQUOS, waiting for the Xbox360.

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Adventure, Fighting, Shooters
Now playing: Soul Calibur III, Ikusagami
Favorite mini-game: Tie: The Mercenaries (Resident Evil 4), Triple Triad (Final Fantasy VIII)



< **Dai Kohama**

Dai spends his days unnaturally attached to his Nintendo DS, absorbed in Animal Crossing to the point that proper meals and sleep elude him. While his situation may be lamentable, he's more concerned about his co-editor Nick, who he was astonished to learn had purchased an Xbox. "An Xbox360...?", he asked. "No, an Xbox. You know, like...an Xbox," was the reply. It seems as though the Japanese Xbox Nick had brought with him from America and used "maybe three times" had abruptly ceased to function, and he found himself unable to play Panzer Dragoon Orta. The choice to buy an Xbox 1 mere days before the 360 launch may be a laudable decision as a gamer, though Dai feels that this is probably less so as a human being.

Favorite genres: Action, Shooters, Other
Now playing: Animal Crossing DS, Pokémon Mysterious Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team
Favorite mini-game: Famicom emulator (Animal Crossing GC)

NEWS

Microsoft's Swanky Xbox360 Lounge

Witness this hyperswank 2750-square-foot lounge located in ritzy Aoyama; fear the amount of money Microsoft has to play with. Marvel at the gigantic "X" orb crashing in through the ceiling, gape in awe at the massive 200-inch screen, get soused on Xbox-themed mixed drinks (Emerald X or Green Illusion), wonder at the array of X-shaped sweets crafted by six of Japan's top patissiers. In a country where fewer than 500,000 original Xboxes sold, no less. Of course, the myriad entertainments don't end there: In addition to the plentiful 360 play kiosks, you can also admire a selection of original system faceplates created by celebrities and famous designers, participate in various events, purchase stylish Xbox360 apparel, or just generally fraternize with Tokyo's glitterati fashionista élite. The Xbox Lounge operates until mid-January 2007.







NEWS

Castlevania Release Day Event

This month's Only In Akihabara Moment™: Castlevania Curse of Darkness' public launch event at Sofmap's main store (released in Japan more than a month after the US), attended by director Koji Igarashi (IGA), character designer Ayami Kojima, and composer Michiru Yamane. Following an enlightening interview (topics included Isaac's disturbingly low-slung pants, the possibility of a direct sequel to Symphony of the Night, and the fact that IGA has no direct involvement with the recently-announced Castlevania movie), the entire crowd got to play rock-paper-scissors with the trio, with the top ten taking home autographs. Play's own Dai Kohama managed to win three times consecutively, easily sliding into the top ten. Despite protesting he "sucked at rock-paper-scissors", DK snagged the triple-autograph, much to his co-editor's chagrin.





GAME REVIEW







Ikusagami

Get ready to go mano-a-sesenta y cinco mil quinientos treinta y cinco

Do you remember the last time a game came out of *nowhere* and struck you silly —a game you had no idea even existed? I sure don't. In this age where games cost so much to produce they demand their audience be aware of them months (if not years) before their actual release date, a sneak attack like Ikusagami ("War God", no relation to God of War) is rare, and most welcome. Though I enjoyed Jade Cocoon 1 & 2 very much, I've never had any particular affection for developer Genki. Kengo and Tokyo Xtreme Racer just aren't my thing. But man alive, have these guys got talent.

I'll just begin with the most obvious and pressing issue: This game can display (not to mention keep track of) 65,535 enemies at once! At 60fps! On PlayStation 2! Take a look at the auto-map in the upper right-hand corner of the screens. See those tiny red dots? Each one represents a single enemy. The blue dots are your allies. Yeah, for real. It's like Dynasty Warriors 27, or something. You can walk away from a game of Ikusagami and say with confidence, "Oh sure, today I killed like a million guys." And *mean* it.



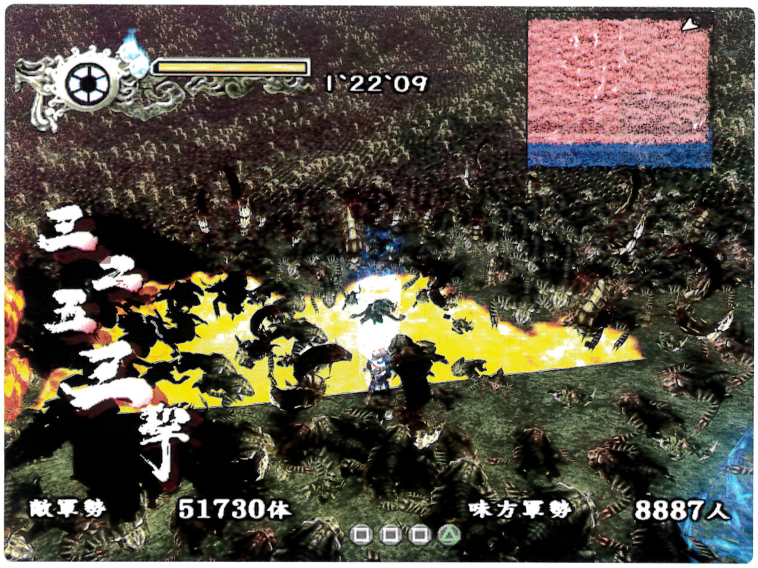
Okay, so you can kill tons and tons of enemies. But is it any good? Do you just button-mash? Does a single swipe of your sword take down hundreds of enemies at once? Well...pretty much yeah. But it's a hell of a lot of fun. For starters, never before in the history of gaming have you been able to control a character as *mighty* as the Inugami, or God Dog. This anthropomorphic badass decimates entire units with a single blow: think Saruman in the opening scenes of Fellowship of the Ring. Neither text nor screenshots can do Inugami's Space Runaway Ideon-level destruction justice —you simply have to see it for yourself. There are really no parallels that can be drawn, save to imagine a Dynasty Warriors and scale up the carnage a hundredfold. While it can't hold a candle in the visual department, Ikusagami even manages to outdo the upcoming Ninety-Nine Nights in terms of sheer numbers. One is tempted to think Genki might be playing up the figures, perhaps counting single enemies as several "kills", but upon close inspection this does not seem to be the case. The enemy and ally soldier models, however, are very, very simple —I almost want to call them Saturn-esque. When you've got this many swarming onscreen, though, it hardly matters. The game is so relentlessly fast, you'll never get a chance to study them up close anyway.

Though the main game is comprised of a Story Mode with sixteen gigantic stages (four bonus areas become available as you advance through the game), the story itself is of little consequence. Perhaps I'd be more jived about the plot if it weren't the *fifth* PS2 action game in the last couple years to fantasize Japan's late Sengoku/Azuchi-Momoyama period (I count Samurai Warriors, Samurai Warriors Xtreme Legends, Onimusha 3, and Sengoku Basara, though I wouldn't be surprised if there were others I've forgotten). All your favorite period figures are here, from Oda Nobunaga to Akechi Mitsuhide to Takeda Shingen. If you know your Japanese history, the way Inugami and his keeper, priestess Yasaka Aoi (entrusted to rid the land of evil etc. etc.)'s tale intertwines fact with fiction can be fun, but foreknowledge is certainly not necessary. We're just here to slay hordes of demons,

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thank you.
And slay them Inugami does...most righteously. The controls are fairly simple: Square and Triangle are strung together to create combos, X is used to block and/or cancel an attack, R2 for issuing orders to ally troops, Circle for erecting Onbashira (more below), and R1 for unleashing the truly fearsome Reiryoku Kaihou, or Spirit Release. This devastating mode drains the Spirit Gauge (normally used for special attacks) rapidly but transforms Inugami into an *unholy whirling dervish of death and destruction*. You'll only get a half-minute or so of mileage out of a full bar, but when your kill rate is approximately four hundred foes per second, bodies and ichor and debris sent hurtling through the air, one can hardly complain. The more strategic elements of the game are served by the sacred pillars, or Onbashira, that Inugami can erect, producing varied effects such as healing your troops (often in excess of 7,000 will accompany you into battle), send brimstone or holy arrows raining down upon the devil-throngs, or command your soldiers to advance or stop at a certain pillar. This becomes very important, as Inugami himself can't break the Blood Crystals that continuously spawn enemies —only humans can, and he has to lead his men to them. Further, each stage has its own condition for victory. Don't expect to be able to win in later stages by endless button-mashing: You may have to protect a certain general, defeat a certain enemy, break a certain number of Blood Crystals, destroy a certain building, or any combination of the above.





"3253-Hit Combo." Whoa dude, that's a lot of enemies.



Genki's managed to pull heretofore-unseen snazz out of a system we thought we knew everything about.

"Okay, so you can kill tons and tons of enemies. But is it any good? Do you just button-mash? Does a single swipe of your sword take down hundreds of enemies at once?"

The visuals in Ikusagami are a curious thing. Taken as still images, they may seem almost amateurish, with PlayStation 1-level models and textures. In motion, however, they tell a very different story. How Genki —a developer not necessarily known for their technical prowess —managed to squeeze this level of performance out of the aging PlayStation 2 is a mystery as deep as that of the Phaistos Disk. They're not kidding when they claim they're displaying sixty thousand enemies at once, without even a suggestion of slowdown or pop-up. The stages stretch out as far as the eye can see, crawling with locust-like swarms of demons. A *very* close look at how Genki's handling the enemy display reveals tricky level-of-detail techniques being employed, with multiple levels of model detail trailing off from full-poly creatures nearby to mere pixel specks when miles away. During actual gameplay, however, the transitions between detail levels are seamless and unnoticeable. These crazy programmin' shenanigans are complemented by gorgeous pyrotechnic displays of firework-like storms of arrows launched by both your allies and foes, and Inugami's own 50 yard-long sword slashes.

Overlaying everything is a hazy, ethereal filter, imparting a dreamlike quality, almost as though the player were viewing the action through sheer silk cloth. Hard to describe, but quite beautiful. The in-game graphics may indeed be jaw-dropping, but the pre-rendered cinemas feel like they come from the late 90s. Not to be cruel, but by 2005 standards they're hideous. Modelling, (lack of) texture, motion and sound editing are all deplorable. Poorly designed, poorly edited, and with sound so muffled you can barely make out what the characters are saying, Ikusagami's cutscenes are powerful enough to induce migraines. This problem is further compounded by a spiffy hand-animated 2-D anime intro, leading the player to believe the entire game might feature such visual riches. Alas, this is not the case, but as I say above, we're not here to watch a movie; we're here to grind demon armies to powder.
Genki's Ikusagami is the perfect example of an import game. Almost certainly never coming to America and playable even if you don't read any Japanese (you may, of course, need a FAQ for the menus and mission objectives), I give Ikusagami a hearty thumbs-up and recommend it to anyone able to run import PS2 games. The main quest is quite long for a primarily-action title, and a generous amount of unlockable features are available: 99 different weapons, each with different attributes and categorized into six separate playstyles, four hidden stages, and four minigame-like short challenges. An extra playable character would have been nice, but beggars can't be choosers. So come on, why not give a game you've never heard of a try for a change? Nick Des Barres

Ikusagami — 8.5 Score
PlayStation 2
+ Astounding visuals, rip-roaringly fun gameplay.
− 1997-quality cinema scenes, lack of variety.
Developer: Genki **Publisher:** Genki **Online:** None
Available: Now (Japan)

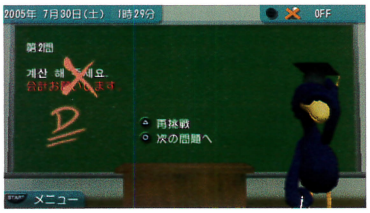
Talkman

Before you can walk the walk, you must learn to talk the talk



The Talkman mic screws into the top of your PSP, rendering many third-party cases useless. Oof!

The backbone of Talkman is its most impressive feature, though the effort put into giving host Max a likable personality runs a close second.





'd like to rent a pair of opera glasses. Somebody's drowning! Can I have a laxative? Do you have a boyfriend? Would you take off your underwear? Give me your money! Are you pregnant? Would you like some cheese? Have you ever found yourself in a foreign country where one or all of the above phrases would have been useful? Did you find yourself unable to utter them because you didn't know the local tongue? Well, my friend, Sony's new automatic translator/language tool/minigame repository Talkman is for you.

But wait, I'll get to Talkman in a moment. Let's first take a moment to talk about the PSP. Nearly everyone I know here in Japan considers it a "digital lifestyle companion", not a game machine. Little wonder — the platform has yet to see a single killer app, now a full year after its release. Sure, the web browsing, location-free TV, mp3 and movie playing is all quite nice, but certainly the PSP was meant to be a game machine first? If so, where are the games? Is this not some exciting hardware? Won't someone make a game for it? Please?

"So, yeah, it's not a game. But it's an astonishing technical achievement, and marks a major milestone for the PSP in Japan..."

So I sat, and I fret, and I awaited my PSP killer app. Imagine my surprise when I discover it turned out to be not a "game", per se, but rather...a digital lifestyle companion. Yes folks, the killer app has finally arrived, and it is Talkman. So what is it, exactly? Put simply, it's one of those magical inventions you never knew you needed until it arrived. Admittedly, the potential user base for Talkman is fairly small at this point, probably limited to east Asia. But if you have a PSP and plan on traveling in Japan, China or Korea, a copy of Talkman could prove to be indispensable. Put simply, Talkman is a voice-activated automatic translation tool. Enter "Talk Mode" from the main menu, select from one of 28 "scenes" ranging from "In the plane", "Hotel", and "Shopping" to more eclectic choices such as "Beauty salons" and "Skiing". Once in the scene menu, hold Square and ask Max, the friendly on-screen avatar, what you're looking for. Instantly, the translation pops up in your target language. Depending on your statement/question, you can then request a reply from your conversation partner, who chooses from an on-screen menu. You don't have to worry about phrasing the question exactly was Max would, either, as he'll pick up on individual words and attempt to parse what you're trying to say. The voice recognition in Talkman is truly amazing, requiring no training and getting things right a good 80-90% of the time. As long as you stay on-topic, rarely is more than two tries necessary. With a reported 3000-plus individual conversations, it's likely you'll never be at a loss for words. You may not be able to discuss quantum physics or the oeuvre of Abbas Kiarostami, but for the day-to-day you'll be more than covered.

Other modes include pronunciation quizzes, listening quizzes, currency/metric converters, and an extensive voice-memo recording system, which saves to your MemoryStick. Clearing the pronunciation and listening quizzes with the highest rank — no mean feat, as near-native elocution is demanded — unlocks various cute minigames completely unrelated to language to be played with your conversation partner once you've broken the ice.

So, yeah, it's not a game. But it's an astonishing technical achievement, and marks a major milestone for the PSP in Japan, which is why we covered it. Imagine if Talkman was also compatible with European languages... the mind boggles. Would 3,000 conversations in, say, eight languages even fit on a 1.8-gig UMD? Who knows. If Sony could manage to shoehorn the holy grail of French, Spanish, Italian and German into a potential Talkman 2, they might just have a worldwide killer app on their hands. In the meantime, if you plan on vacationing in Asia, or just want to brush up your Japanese, by all means pick Talkman up — you can play it on your American PSP with no problems, and all menus can be switched to English at bootup. Nick Des Barres

Talkman

PSP

9.0 Score

Virtually everything.

X: Limited to English and three east Asian languages.

Developer: SCE **Publisher:** SCE **Online:** None
Available: Now (Japan)

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THE GANTZ SEASON 1 COLLECTION HAS ARRIVED!

UNCUT & UNEDITED THE VERSION TOO GRAPHIC FOR JAPANESE TV!



"Excellent production, insanely fresh story and as bonkers as Hell."
–PLAY MAGAZINE

"When was the last time you saw a gritty sexual and action packed anime making a social commentary on our lack of humanity?...it succeeds with flying colors."
–ANIMATED BLISS

No one knows where it came from. No one knows who sent it. It is a featureless black sphere, and it is called the Gantz. For Kei Kurono, killed in a horrifying subway accident, it is his new lord and master. For if Kei and his fellow resurrectees fail in the brutal "games" which the Gantz assigns them, they will all die. Again.

Packed with pounding Dolby 5.1 surround sound, interviews with the production staff and more!

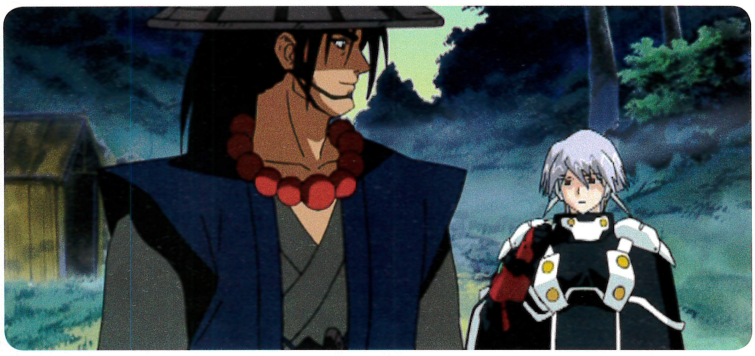
GANTZ
SEASON 1 COLLECTION
GANTZ
GANTZ
GANTZ

Divergence Eve Misaki Chronicles

Episode 1: The Fanservice Menace



Darn it, he did it again. Just when you think you're going to get some ridiculously exaggerated jigglefest, director Hiroshi Negishi– infamous for wink-nudge series like *Burn Up W* incidentally-- goes and pulls out the stops on the sequel to its time-traveling adventure predecessor, *Divergence Eve*. Misaki, the ditzy team member from the original go-around gets the star treatment this time, as we flash back to the start of her military training. But so does HQ on the sly, indiscriminately using her past as a guide to locating the invisible monstrosities known as the Ghouls that are scattered throughout time. Other incidents occur even further back to a feudal 1594 Japan, where the gun meets the sword, leaving time-traveling fans drooling for more with its technobabble and rich sci-fi elements. Comedy is kept to a minimum as well as the cheekiness, which ultimately feels like a cover for laundering a richer series underneath. Think of it as a Playboy playmate who's more interested in talking about quantum physics than taking her clothes off, and you're well on your way to understanding-- but no one said you had to like it. It provokes new questions that beg to be answered, and hopefully will by series –and not rear-- end. Jim Dewey



Divergence Eve - Misaki Chronicles — **8.0** Score

Volume: 1 - "Second Chances"

- Where does the time go? Here, there & everywhere! Ninjas, moon stations, time machines!
- Fanservice otaku will be flummoxed by the bait-and-switch in favor of sci-fi heartiness.

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV-14
Running Time: 125 minutes **Available:** January 3, 2006



"Think of it as a Playboy playmate who's more interested in talking about quantum physics than taking her clothes off."



She makes a spread gun look awfully pretty.




I'm sorry, Katsushiro. I convinced you to do a horrible thing—take your first life to make a situation easier for me, when you had to carry the burden... That's what the scent of battle is, isn't it? The burden Samurai carry. The ghosts of the men they killed.
DVD of the Year - Anime Insider
"One of the Most Essential DVDs of any anime collection."
Akira Kurosawa's
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Lupin the 3rd
The Columbus Files

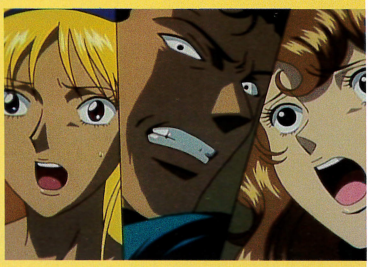
Fun with Fujiko



Lupin, Jigen, and Goemon are up to their old tricks in the Columbus Files with one major wrinkle…Fujiko isn't exactly Fujiko. During a game of cat and mouse while she's conniving Lupin into helping her snag the Columbus Egg—a powerful device rumored to have been discovered by Columbus on his infamous voyage to discover you know what—all he cares about is getting her into the sack, until they're both rudely awakened...by missiles. Just as Lupin's about to score (or so we think), all heck breaks loose, courtesy of Nasalloff, the most annoying villain in Lupin history (try Quentin Tarantino fused with the Joker…with a cold). The ensuing battle renders the Columbus Files burnt to a crisp, and

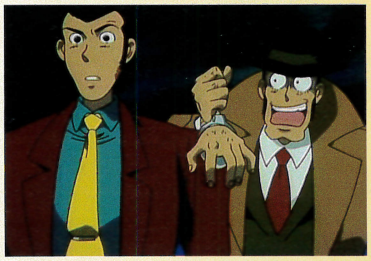
"...tomb raiding, harrier jets, and one serious WMD."



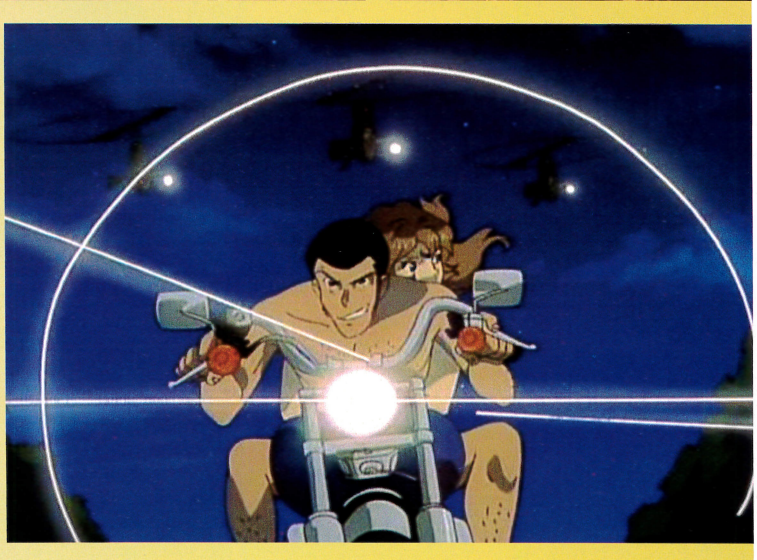


Fujiko, who has the docs committed to memory, one-hundred-percent out of commission by way of one serious case of amnesia. After somehow managing to drag herself into the abode of hotty treasure hunter, Rosario—who happens to be connected to the psycho who hired Nasalloff to grab the egg so he can control the world's weather—the Lupin-esque high-jinks ensue, including, but not limited to, more feeble attempts by Zenigata to bring Lupin in, a laundry list of completely implausible secret agent devices and disguises, tomb raiding, harrier jets, and one serious WMD. While entertaining enough, there's something slightly off about *The Columbus Files* that I can't quite put my finger on. It may not be one of his best outings, in league with *Castle Cagliostro, Twilight Gemini or Harimao's Treasure*, but it's a fun ride nevertheless.

Dave Halverson



I sure hope Zenigata has a good pension plan.



Lupin the 3rd: The Columbus Files

Volume: 1

7.5 Score

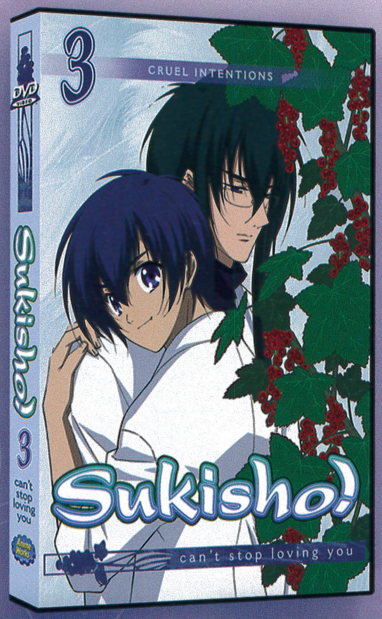
+ Some truly hilarious moments between Jigen and Goemon, lots of sex appeal and a truly wacky cast.

− Not one of Lupin's best overall. The implausible really runs wild, even for Lupin.

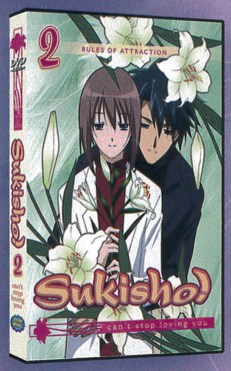
Released by: FUNimation Productions **Rating:** TV-PG
Running Time: 95 minutes **Available:** November

Sora fell from the roof of his high school and was knocked unconscious. When he finally awoke, he found a kind-hearted boy named Sunao waiting over him. Sunao claims to be his best friend, but the fall erased some of Sora's memory. He doesn't remember Sunao at all, and the wide-eyed young man acts like much more than just a friend. From that day on, Sora begins to experience flashbacks in which he is not himself, but a mysterious alternate personality with hidden powers.

Sukisho!







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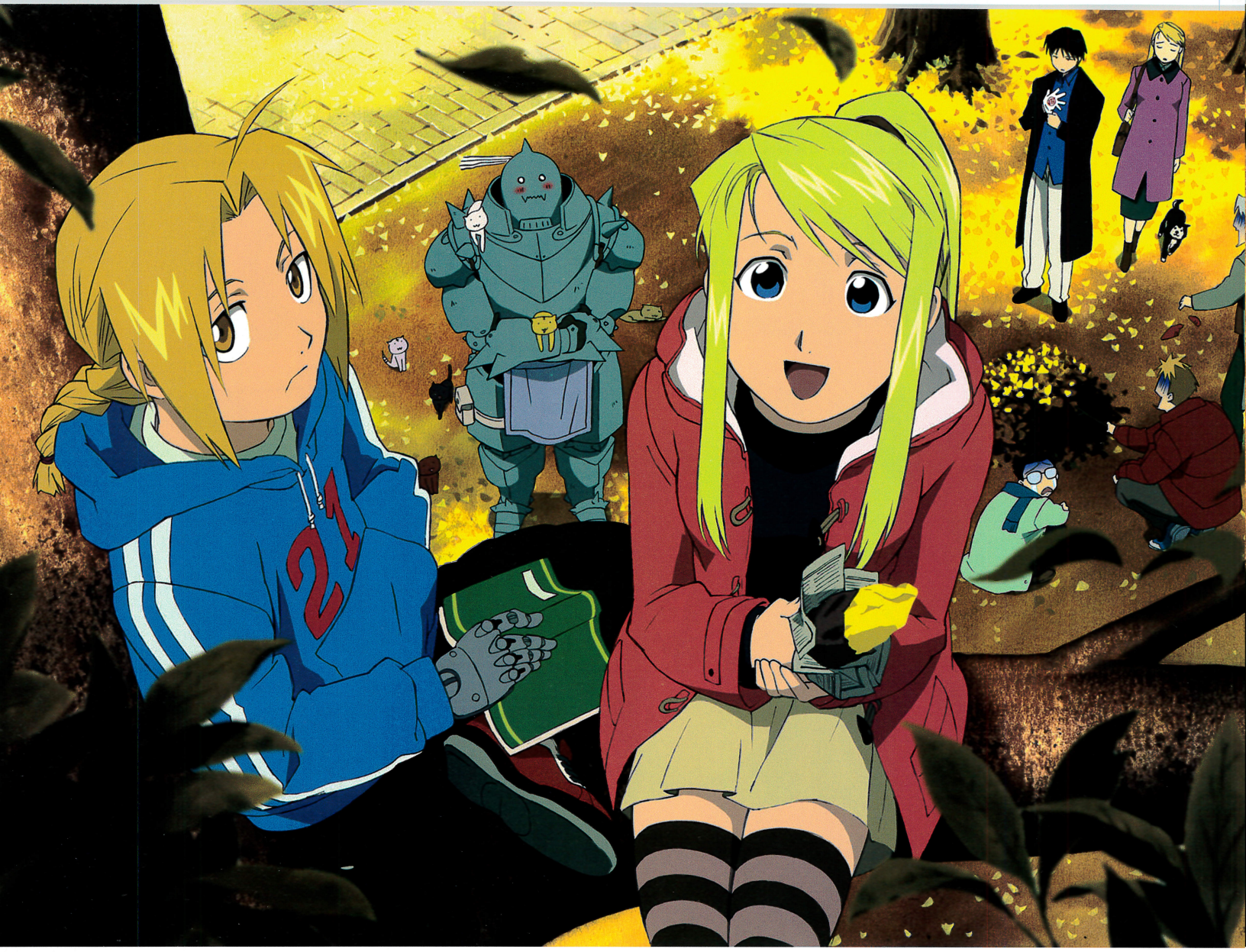
SUKISHO Can't Stop Loving You Volume 3: Cruel Intentions
Contains episodes 10-13
SRP: $19.95

Anime Works

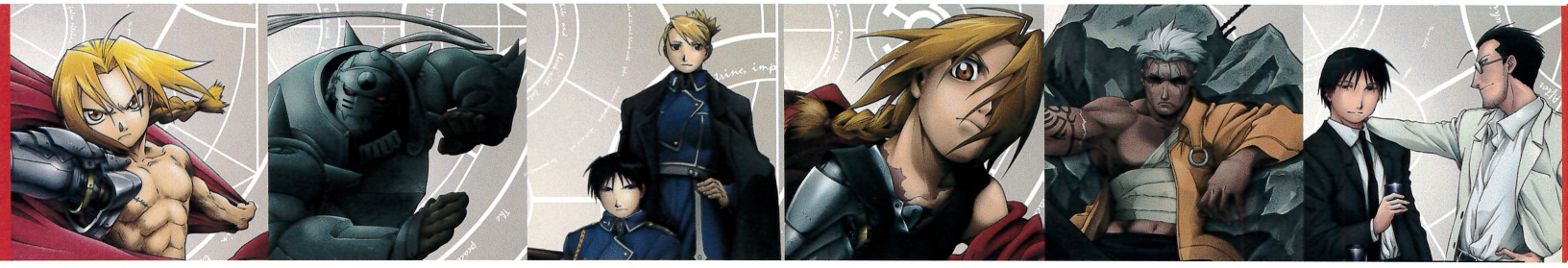
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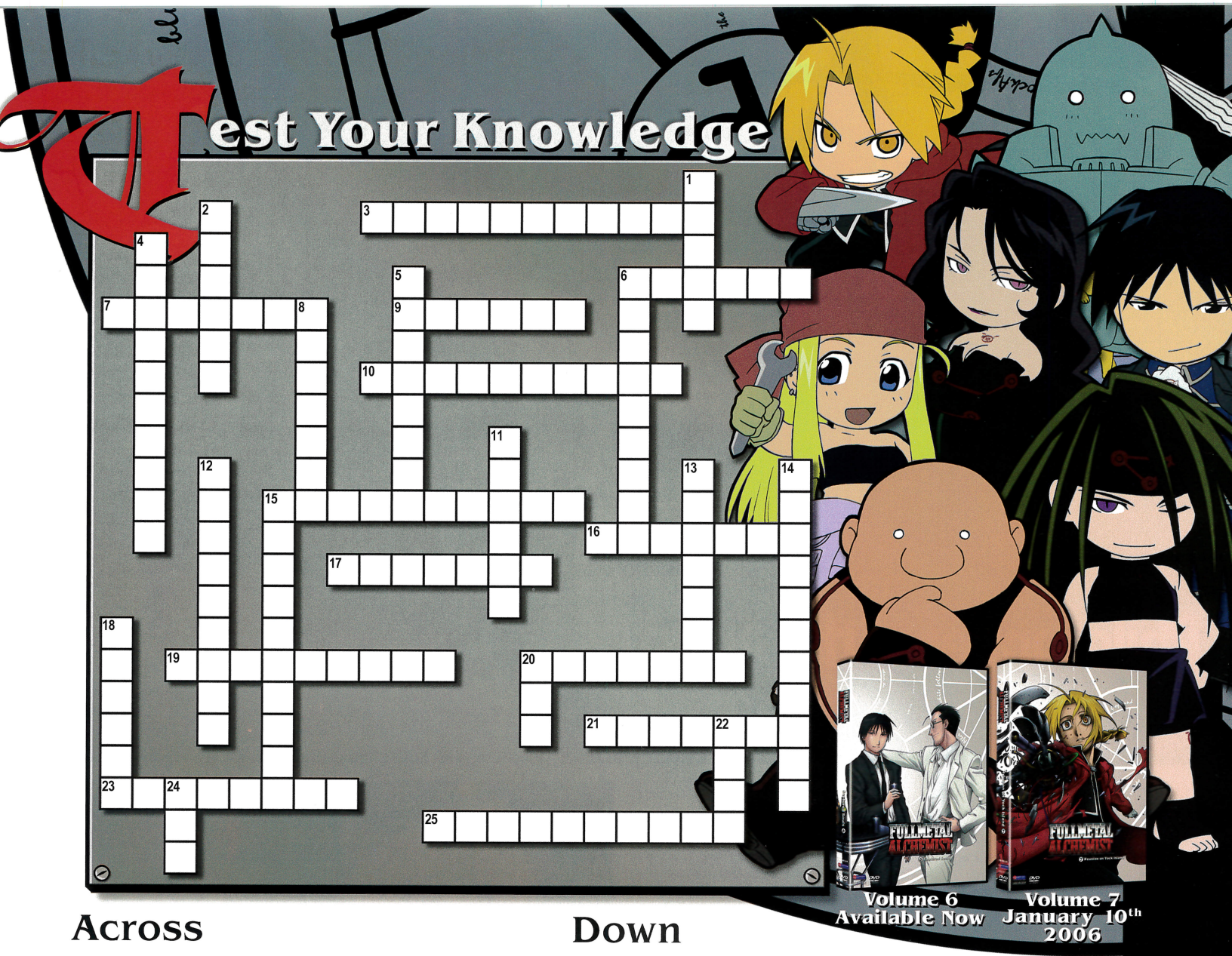
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Test Your Knowledge



Volume 6 Available Now

Volume 7 January 10th 2006

Across

3. Given to every State Alchemist
6. The Crystal Alchemist
7. Author of the Fullmetal Alchemist manga
9. Maes Hughes' pride and joy
10. Being created through the failure of human transmutation
15. Band who performs "READY STEADY GO"
16. Challenges Edward to a race in episode 26
17. Barry the Chopper's profession
19. Hometown of Edward and Alphonse
20. King Bradley's secretary
21. Creature created by combining two or more organisms
23. A liquid with the potential for alchemical amplification
25. Automail capital of the world

Down

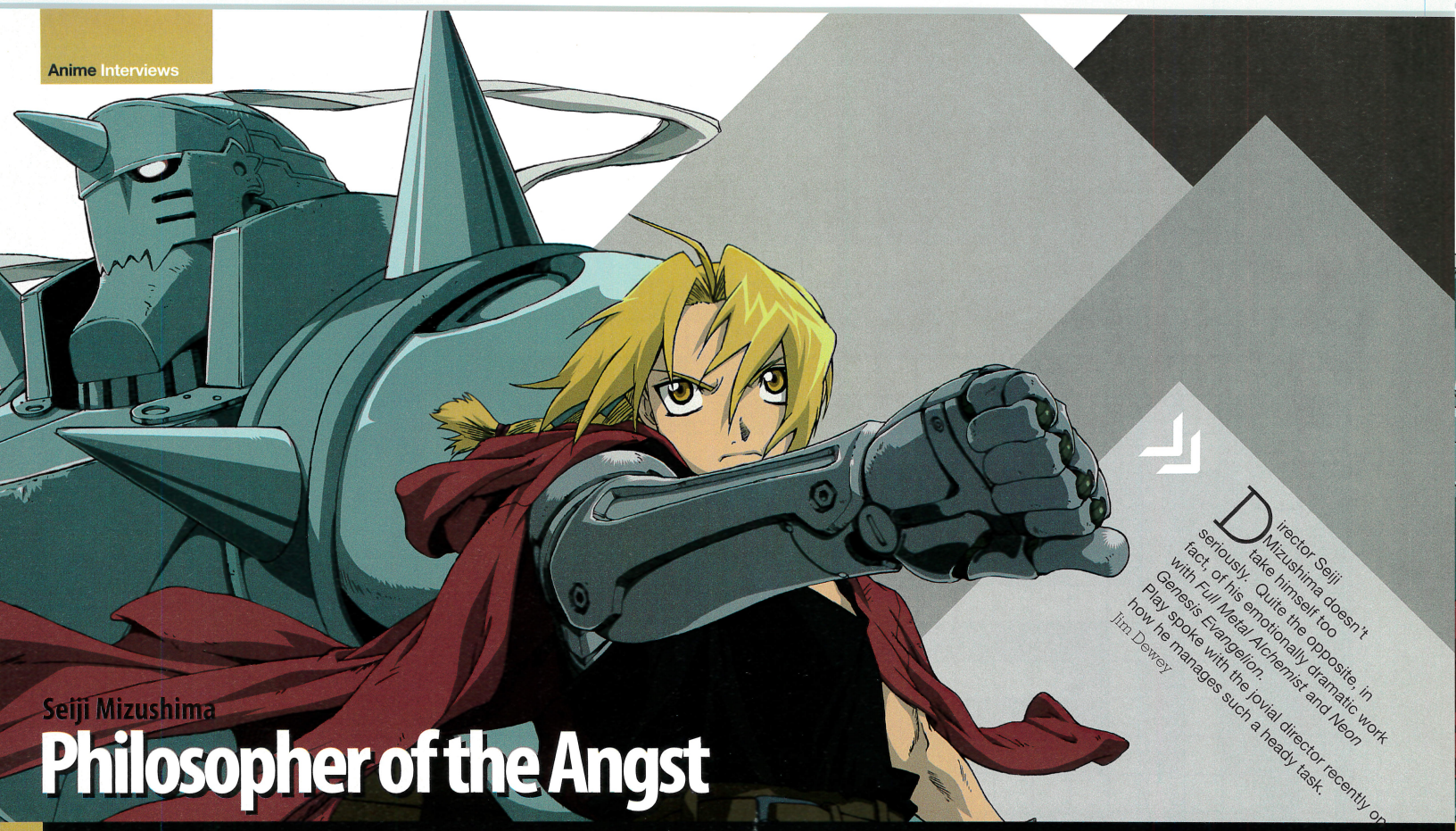
1. Never call Edward this
2. The Sewing-Life Alchemist
4. Tattoo found on Lust, Envy, and Gluttony
5. Location Clara tells Edward to search for the Philosopher's Stone
6. Director of anime series
8. The city of water
11. The phantom thief
12. Edward and Alphonse's Father
13. Has a photographic memory
14. Hawkeye's loyal companion
15. Yoki's military rank
18. Rank for King Bradley
20. "___" of the military
22. Shapeshifter
24. Winry's dog

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Director Seiji Mizushima doesn't take himself too seriously. Quite the opposite, in fact, of his emotionally dramatic work with *Full Metal Alchemist* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Play spoke with the jovial director recently on how he manages such a heady task.
Jim Dewey

Seiji Mizushima
Philosopher of the Angst

Interview Seiji Mizushima, Full Metal Alchemist Director

play: In *Full Metal Alchemist*, brothers Edward and Alphonse experience horrors greater than anyone their age should have to endure... is it hard watching what happens to them for you personally?
Nowadays there are not many children who understand others or their own pain. When I was a kid, if there was a knife laying around, it would hurt if you cut your fingers [simulates pricking his finger and grimacing], so it was understood that pain is a part of our lives. But today's children do not have that. So in order to show it, it is painful yes, but we have to show it in a big way visually and narratively. Pain is a key word in the series.

The *FMA* movie recently came out in Japan. What was the experience of working on a theatrical movie for the first time like, and how was it received?
This was my first opportunity, so it was a good experience. There's been good and bad response to be sure.

I don't think you'll have to worry about the response when it arrives here in America. Where does it fit into the storyline of the show?
It takes place about two years after the show, with some interesting new things. It takes place in 1923, and the Nazis are emerging, a Munich revolt, so it will be controversial in a way, and I expected that.

You also directed an episode of *Evangelion*. I have to ask—did the ending make sense to you?
I admire Mr. Anno Hamiyaki, regardless of what he does, so it's okay by me! [laughs] I am a total admirer of his work. I like both the film and television endings, but I figured that I have my own theory of the ending, which I'm sure differs from Mr. Anno's.

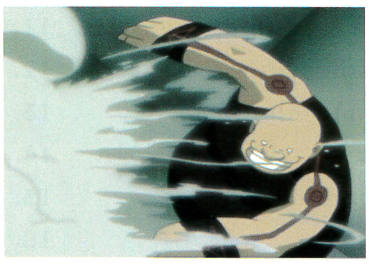
To each his own ending, then?
I think that's the right way to understand Eva's ending.

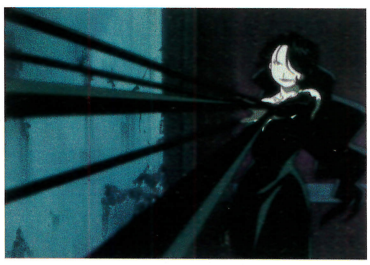
What does it do for you in your mind to work and have worked on such benchmark series like *Eva* and *FMA*?
Well, it will certainly make my next project go through a lot easier, for one, whatever that may be. It's opening a window for me.

What's next in your work incidentally?
Currently, I'm working on a proposal for *O Idoro Gento*... its a story about trying to launch a rocket during the Edo time period; it's originally a stage play I'd like turned into a series.
How long is it planned for?
26 episodes with Madhouse, with [producer Masao] Mauryama.

Finally, working with both storyboards and as a director, do they go hand in hand or is there more satisfaction with one in particular?
If time permitted, I'd like to do all the storyboards myself, directing from them. But, it's given the time crunch on projects, it's just not feasible. At the same time, my co-workers storyboards allow me a chance to see things from a new perspective, and I admire their helping me see things from new angles, both literally and figuratively.







"Nowadays there are not many children who understand others or their own pain."

Seiji Mizushima, Full Metal Alchemist Director

anime essentials

must-have anime, manga & music

watch this



Kiddy Grade

Released by: FUNimation Productions **Rating:** 13 +
Now Playing: File 1 **Running Time:** 150 minutes

Fighting crime has never looked so good...or been so affordable! In case you were in orbit and somehow missed Kiddy Grade (one of 04's very best series) now's the time to catch up with FUNimations new 6 episode "Files" for just 29.98. Under 30 bucks for all that Gonzo. And few crime busters are as easy on the eyes as Lumiere.



Astro Boy: A Hero for All Ages

Released by: Manga Video
Rating: NR **Running Time:** 1530 minutes

Manga Video spins pure Osamu Tezuka (Japan's "God of Comics") gold with this amazing collection featuring 51 half-hour Astro Boy episodes on 8 DVDs along with a 24-page, full-color booklet and such features as deleted scenes, original character art galleries, a merchandise gallery, character profiles, alternative angle opening storyboards and more.

read this



Junk Force: The Novel

Released by: Dr. Master Publications
Story and Art: Hideki Kakinuma

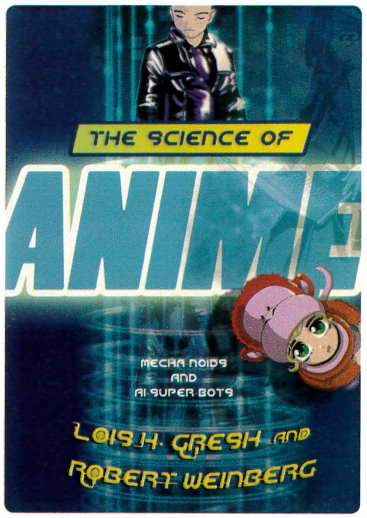
Go beyond the sci-fi manga with this first novelization of Junk Force and further explore the trials and tribulations of Liza, Wooty, Mill, Mamet and Lewis. It's an all-out fleshing out! www.DrMasterbooks.com



RAhXePhON

Released by: Dr. Master Publications **Volume:** 1
Art: Hiroshi Ohnogi **Story:** Bones/Yutaka Izubuchi

The giant robot-packed, hard to put down RAhXePhON novel revisits events from the anime in first-person perspective as seen through the eyes of various characters from the RAhXePhON mythos. Compelling stuff here; fans won't want to miss it. www.DrMasterbooks.com



The Science of Anime

Released by: Thunder's Mouth Press
Authors: Lois H. Gresh and Robert Weinberg

The Science of Anime probes various TV classics from MS Gundam and Neon Genesis Evangelion to feature anime films like Akira and Ghost in the Shell and explores the scientific fact and fiction used in their creation. From the history and evolution of anime mecha to an overview of AI and so forth, this is one fascinating read.



Street Fighter: The New Challenges! Graphic novels

Released by: Udon Entertainment/Devil's Due **Volume:** 1-2
Story and Art: Ken Siu-Chong

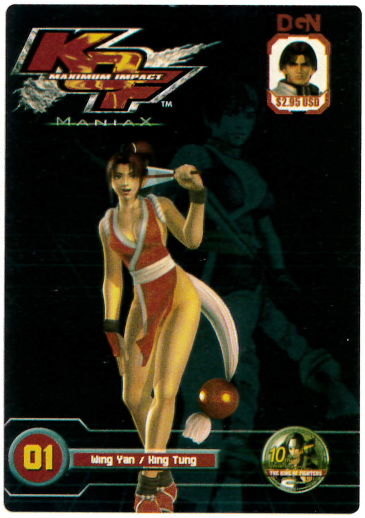
Alvin Lee's pencils together with Espen Grudetjern's colors bring Street Fighter to life in this sterling comic book adaptation broken into character-driven stories and packed with features. The best buck-ninety-nine you'll ever spend.



Street Fighter II Comic #0

Released by: Udon Comics
Art and Story: Ken Siu-Chong

Any gamer worth his Cammy infatuation has to check out Udon Entertainment's full-color Street Fighter graphic novels. These are gorgeous books that do the series proud and you know how rare that is. www.udoncomics.com



KOF Maximum Impact Maniax

Released by: Dr. Master Publications
Art and Story: Wing Yan/King Tung

Don't look now but just like in the old fighting game wars here comes SNK's fighting elite to join the comic book ranks. Someone get Samurai Showdown on the phone this instant! Volumes 1-6 are available now. www.DrMasterbooks.com

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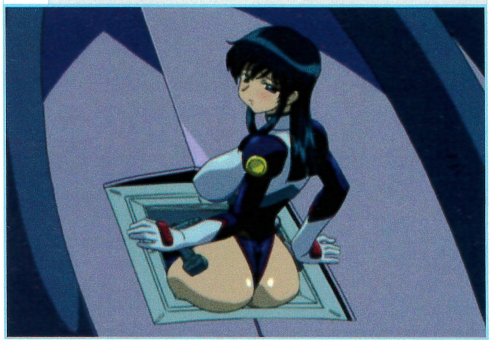
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Flame of Recca** *viz media*
02	**Street Fighter Alpha Generation** *manga ent.*
03	**Astro Boy** *manga ent.*
04	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig** *manga/bandai ent.*
05	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai entertainment*
06	**Ghost Stories** *adv films*
07	**Grenadier** *anime works*
08	**Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
09	**Tetsujin 28** *geneon entertainment*
10	**Samurai 7** *funimation productions*



Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Godannar** *adv films*
02	**Immortal Grand Prix** *bandai entertainment*
03	**Samurai 7** *funimation productions*
04	**Full Metal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
05	**Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
06	**Samurai Gun** *adv films*
07	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai entertainment*
08	**Genshiken** *anime works*
09	**Grenadier** *anime works*
10	**Full Metal Panic Fumoffu** *adv films*

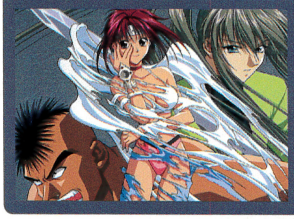


your megastore beckons!



Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig
manga/bandai ent.

Kusanagi, Batou and the members of Section 9 get back to business now that the Laughing Man laughs no more.

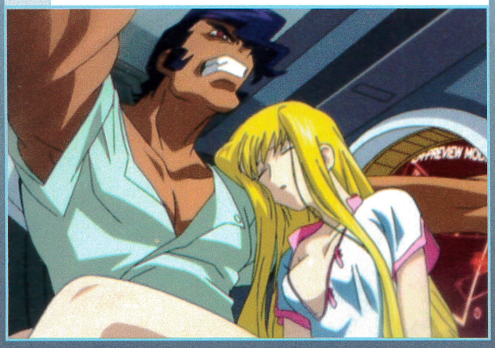


Flame of Recca
viz media

It's Tournament time for Recca and the rest of the members of Team Hokage in VIZ Media's Flame of Recca.

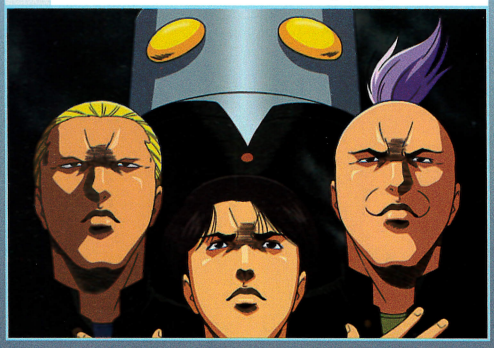
Dave Halverson

01	**Goddanar** *adv films*
02	**Immortal Grand Prix** *bandai entertainment*
03	**Full Metal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
04	**Samurai 7** *funimation productions*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd Gig** *manga/bandai*



Jim Dewey

01	**Cromartie High-School** *adv films*
02	**Gankoutsu: The Count of Monte Cristo** *geneon*
03	**Cowboy Bebop Remix** *bandai ent.*
04	**Ghost Stories** *adv films*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd Gig** *manga/bandai*



Nelson Lui

01	**Goddanar** *adv films*
02	**Jubei Chan 2** *geneon entertainment*
03	**Elfen Lied** *adv films*
04	**Genshiken** *anime works*
05	**Grenadier** *anime works*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**Samurai Champloo** *geneon entertainment*
02	**Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
03	**Gunslinger Girl** *funimation productions*
04	**Fullmetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
05	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd Gig** *manga/bandai*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**Kamui** *broccoli books*
02	**A Midnight Opera** *tokyopop manga*
03	**Junk Force** *drmaster*
04	**Psy-Comm** *tokyopop manga*
05	**Samurai Champloo** *tokyopop manga*

Readers' Most Wanted

01	**One Piece** *toei*
02	**InuYasha The Movie 3** *viz media*
03	**Street Fighter Alpha Generations** *manga ent.*
04	**The Professional Golgo 13** *urban vision*
05	**The Karas** *manga ent.*

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NOW READING

the wonderful world of manga

Galaxy Angel



Publisher: Broccoli Books **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Sci-Fi/Comedy
Rating: 13+ **Story and Art:** Kanan

The first 32 pages of Galaxy Angel may as well be in jibberish, as Milfeulle (a.k.a. Milfie) guides us through the wonderfully weird Angel Troupe, taking a little time off from their adventures in space. . . . And then we meet Judy: Milfie's chicken she found by a river as a child. But Judy's no ordinary chicken. According to an ancient fortune-telling book, Judy will lay the magic egg that brings fated lovers together. Too bad it just ransacked her quarters and attacked Forte for biting and gnawing on it. And so it goes as the newest member of the Imperial Forces Angel Troupe, Chitose, settles in for their next mission. You don't so much read Galaxy Angel as much as observe it, and chuckle. **DH**

Read it if: You like cheeky high-jinks with Sci-Fi on the side

Stellvia



Publisher: DrMaster **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Sci-Fi/Comedy
Rating: 13+ **Story:** Xebec **Art:** Ryo Akitsuki

We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming to bring you this special announcement: In approximately 70 days, a wave of supernova explosions will hit the Earth and kill us all. And now back to South Park 2095 in progress. Katose has always dreamt of going into space, and her chance has finally arrived. As a newly enrolled student at Stellvia (a space colony/academy dedicated to saving the Earth from said deadly supernova), she'll need to put her skills as a programmer to the test, but her real dream is to become a pilot and help save Earth from the cockpit. . . Too bad she can't fly. Perseverance, friendship and scrutiny collide in this exceptional space opus-lite. **DH**

Read it if: You want to see if humanity makes it or bites

Tenjho Tenge



Publisher: CMX **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action
Rating: Teen **Story and Art:** Shamefully not listed

When the invincible fighting team of Nagi Socihiro and Bob Makihara show up at Todu Gakuen High School for their usual hostile takeover, they find resistance in the shape of a 3-foot-tall munchkin girl who shape shifts into an über-babe in the blink of an eye and then kicks Nagi's butt with so much thrust he shoots out the window. He's just met the leader of the Juken Club, Maya Natsume, in a school where education takes a back seat (if any seat) to martial arts. Lucky for Nagi, he lands in the girls' shower, directly on top of the Juken Club's newest member, Aya Natsume. . . censored via bra and panties. In fact, much of this great manga is shamefully censored. Get the anime. **DH**

Read it if: You're curious about TT but too young to buy the DVD.

The World Exists for Me



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Fantasy/Romance
Rating: 13+ **Story by:** Be-PaPas **Art:** Chiho Saitou

On a speeding train returning from a school trip to France, young, beautiful high-schooler, Sekai, has decided to tell her friend, Midou, of her true feelings for him. Mere moments after he expresses his wish to remain friends (much to her dismay), a young man approaches, mumbles an incomprehensible statement, and the train violently derails as he pulls her into a void: Next stop: 17th-century France, where her digital camera and miniskirt mark her as witch. Fire and a stake are just around the corner. . . But nothing is as it seems. Sovieul is doll "S", representing half of the book of S&M (source of the Devil's invincible powers) and the other half, "M", is close behind. . . and evil to the core. **DH**

Read it if: You like your 17th-century French history tied in knots.



Serenity



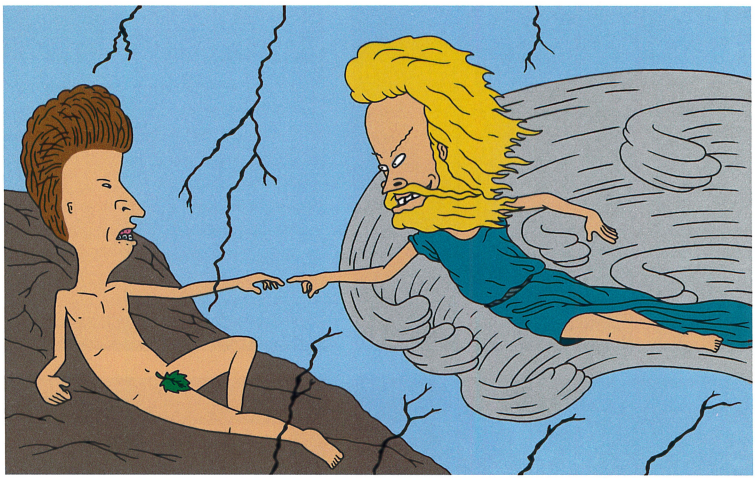
Starring: Nathan Filllion, Gina Torres
Directed by: Joss Whedon
Released By: Universal Home Video
Rated: PG-13

There's no resisting the lively sci-fi pleasures of Joss Whedon's kinetic, infectiously good-natured *Serenity*. The movie plays with the fervor of a classic space opera, never getting weighed down by too much gloom and doom despite some ominous undercurrents in the script. Whedon actually cares about populating his scintillating effects with characters we find meaning in. Originally a one-season failure on television that gathered a fervent cult following on DVD—it's well worth the buy—the campy, smart fun of *Firefly* became the launching pad for this movie of the same spirit. *Serenity* follows the adventures of a band of space-traveling mercenaries, who could be pegged as simpleton criminals but really practice their craft with aplomb and a certain backwards morality. A stowaway on their ship, imbued with strange powers and haunted by portentous nightmares, becomes the center of the action as a group known as the Alliance gives chase to bring her back in. The film moves at a blistering pace, careening from danger zone to danger zone as we hurtle to the exhilarating climax. Brady Fiechter **Movie: B+ Extras: B**

Beavis and Butt-Head: The Mike Judge Collection

Starring: Beavis and Butt-Head, Mr. Anderson, Todd, Grim Reaper
Director: Mike Judge
Released By: MTV/Paramount DVD
Rated: NR

Final Jeopardy: What people did before *South Park* came along… Although I make my pilgrimage to the *Beavis and Butt-Head Movie* at least once a month, there's always room for the infinitely broken wit of the original episodes, especially when they've been hand picked by Mike Judge, season by vile season. Disc one is especially raw (pre-fame, fortune, and Mr. Anderson's Balls) and then all hell breaks loose as the boys go on to become the nation's sweethearts. Talk about the perfect gift: Nothing says "I love you" like a visit from the Great Cornholio! Let alone with extra nuggets like director's cut episodes, B&Bs MTV Music Awards appearance, and that unforgettable Thanksgiving Special with Kurt Loder. Makes you well up just thinking about it. Dave Halverson **Collection: B+ Extras: B**



Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection

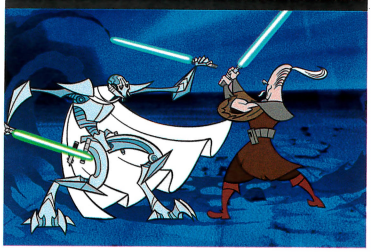
Starring: Sarah Michelle Gellar, Alyson Hannigan, etc.
Directed by: Joss Whedon
Released By: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: NR

Into each generation a box set is born. One box set in all the world. A chosen one…
Any true Buffy fan worth his or her salt will likely faint at the sight of this ultimate must-own box of Buffy brilliance. Pop the top and underneath a signed greeting from Joss Whedon, full-color episode guide and a never-before-seen extras disc with 5 exclusive featurettes you'll find 40 discs containing all 144 episodes complete with cast and crew commentaries, season overviews, outtakes, behind the scenes, scripts, and special interviews. So Hellmouth is no more… Surely there are vampires to extinguish elsewhere. We need a movie, Joss! Dave Halverson
Collection: A- Extras: B+





Star Wars: Clone Wars

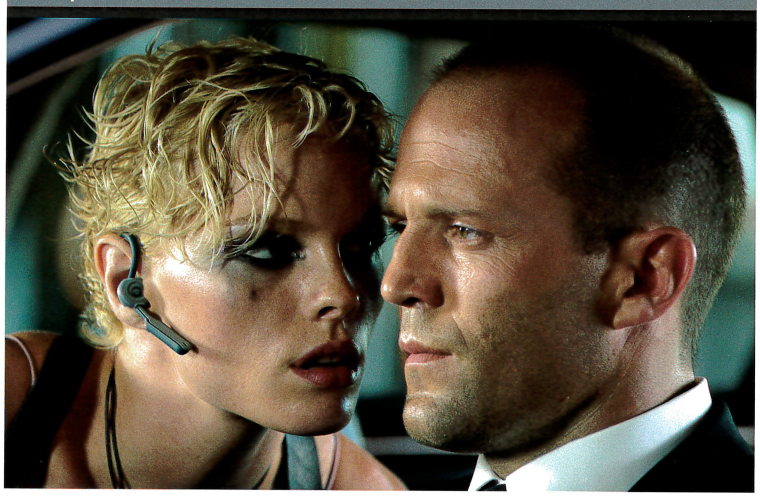




Starring: Corey Burton, Anthony Daniels
Directed by: Genndy Tartakovsky
Released By: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: NR

Dare I say *Star Wars: Clone Wars Vol 2* is as entertaining in its pint-size spectacle as the big-screen space opera from which it's drawn? Well, relatively speaking, of course: it's a must-see treat for any self-respecting fan of Lucas' *Star Wars*. Directed by Samurai Jack and Powerpuff Girls-creator Genndy Tartakovsky, this emmy-winning cartoon adds to the events surrounding the Clone Wars, brushing its tale with a foreign animation style that's refreshingly removed from the norm. But what really surprises and grants *Star Wars: Clone Wars Vol 2* its deserved accolades is the humor and depth of its characters. Even if you think you've had your fill having watched the show on Cartoon Network, the extras and wide-screen, DVD-sharp presentation are a huge draw alone. Brady Fiechter
Show: A- **Extras:** B+

Transporter 2



Starring: Jason Statham, Alessandro Gassman, Amber Valleta
Directed by: Louis Leterrier
Released By: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: PG-13

Never mind the absurdity of every action scene in *Transporter 2*, a movie that whacks you over the head with relentless chases, shootouts and martial arts battles of video-game proportions; you feel your brain freezing up in the absurd climax. It's a stylish, mildly amusing ride, thanks to the energy and skill put forth by director Louis Leterrier. The movie stars the brooding likeability of Jason Statham, who plays a bodyguard tasked with the protection of a drug czar's young son. Out for the kill is a hot assassin that brings a delicious charge to the fireworks show, sent to maintain the balance of criminal power through ransom-deadly-virus demands. You can smell the cheese from the dialogue a mile away, but a few fun story twists zip us along with the action. Brady Fiechter
Movie: C+ **Extras:** C

Aeon Flux: The Complete Animated Collection





Starring: Aeon Flux, Trevor Goodchild
Director: Peter Chung
Released By: MTV/Paramount DVD
Rated: NR

I'm not going to judge the new live-action *Aeon Flux* film by its cover (as in trailer), which together with a game promo opens this collection. In the land of big-screen adaptations, what often looks like a stellar slice of sci-fi pie often turns out to be rubbish salad, but in this case no matter what happens at the box office, it's a win-win situation as the big screen nod will inevitably draw more people to Peter Chung's original work of pure genius, which is available for the first time in one complete collection. This ferociously abstract, incredibly imaginative animated series doesn't just hold up, but comes across as even more poppin' fresh than when it originally aired, given the currently stagnant state of sci-fi. The cat and mouse between Trevor Goodchild and Aeon is as disturbing (yet entertaining) as ever and the ever-present degradation of humanity—used as mere meat puppets—a staunch reminder of how deep the animated wormhole used to go.
Dave Halverson
Collection: A- **Extras:** B

Fantastic 4



Starring: Jessica Alba, Chris Evans, Ioan Gruffudd
Directed by: Tim Story
Released By: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: PG-13

The cheeriest of comic-book movies, *Fantastic 4* is light on its feet, keeping its characters goofily battling their newfound powers more than the destructive villains you'd think would be trying to get in their way. The movie is oddly inconsequential, relying on mostly subdued special effects to try and pick up the slack left by the flimsy story. It just never goes anywhere, petering out just when you think the characters are about to hone their nifty abilities and start making some real noise. There are some fun moments, and the effervescent quality to the film has its charms, but you just can't get past the feeling that you're engaged in an expensive soap-opera for the superhero crowd. Brady Fiechter **Movie:** C **Extras:** B

BACKPAGE PASS

DISTURBED

The blood that pulses through the veins of Disturbed is rich in spit and vinegar. The band takes the imagery of fist pumping to new levels, prompting masses of hard-rock militia to bang their heads. Cuts like "Down With The Sickness," "Liberate" and "Stricken" serve as anthemic juggernauts for the Y generation. The band's heavy arsenal recently reloaded with their latest opus *Ten Thousand Fists* dropping in September of 2005. Add to that a band whose tours are sponsored by Jägermeister and you'll get a sense of the head pounding to be endured. The band thrives on PSP play, reciting some of their favorites as World Series of Poker, Grand Theft Auto, MediEvil, and Coded Arms. Vocalist Dave Draiman indicated that "having lots of things to kill" was his video game motivation. In speaking with Draiman, I found him to be the *anti* rock star. Both eloquent and intellectual, Draiman served up his thoughts on the industry, the music, and the current state of rock and roll.

By Steven Douglas Losey



What do you find disturbing?
People who act like sheep, the current state of our government and the amount of taxes I have to pay.

What should be done about it?
We should try and vote other government officials into office and try and do it better. People need to de sensitize themselves to what they are told they should be and be who they want to be. That would be a beginning.

Do you think in general people are followers and not leaders?
Completely.

Why?
It's easier that way. It's safer. You can always blame things on the last man that made the first move.

What role do you play?
I'm not necessarily a leader but more of an individual. I don't know how qualified I am to be a leader but I try my damndest to do what's best for me and not to follow.

Do you think you speak for the majority?
I'm not really concerned with speaking for the majority. I just want to speak properly for myself. I don't necessarily want to accept that burden of responsibility.

What does Disturbed bring to the party?
A hard rock show the way it's supposed to be.

What does Dave bring to the table?
My heart, my soul, all my strengths, my honor, my integrity, my head.

You don't typically think of honor, strength, and integrity when talking about a hard rock band.
It's a question of how you do what you do Are you writing from your heart about subject matter that means something. Are you doing it in a way that's real? Do you use backing tracks live like a lot of other bands do. Do you connect with the audience? Do you treat them with respect and not just as objects or facilitators of cash? There is definitely honor and integrity in every aspect of what we do.

Do you think rock and roll has gotten diluted in recent years?- I think a lot of it has but there's still plenty of great music out there. I do think particularly over the past two or three years that rock music has gotten diluted to the extreme.

Why is that?
The powers that be have gotten fascinated with one specific trend or sound and they sign a hundred bands that sound exactly the same as each other. They try to push them off as rock when they're not.

You want to name names?
No. I think it's pretty easy to see. I shouldn't have to be specific. You look at the radio waves any day of the week and you'll hear it. It's obvious. When it comes to what's representing rock these days, it can become a little bit embarrassing.

Is it a stylistic thing?
No, It's just that when your talking about rock are you talking about a group of men that are acting like men and singing like men or are you talking about little p*@#ies dressing up like women and singing like little girls. That's the difference that I see. This whole emo/screamo nonsense that they put out in droves these days is just reprehensible.

Since you've been involved in the industry what else has disgusted you?
A lot of the greed and not necessarily on the part of the musicians but the other players involved. That makes me sick in my head.

What kind of music scene is coming out of your hometown Chicago?
Chicago has classically been a lot more like an indy kind of city with bands like Smashing Pumpkins and Local H and what not.

> "This whole emo/screamo nonsense that they put out in droves these days is just reprehen-sible."

Are they influences?
No we draw influences from bands like Metallica, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, Black Sabbath, and Pantera. Those are the bands we draw from.

Were you guys close with Dimebag?
Oh yeah.

It seems like on this record Dan (Donegan) has really amped up his guitar solos. Is that Dimebag inspired?
I'm sure it had something to do with it. We've been encouraging him to come out of the cage for years. We're glad that he's finally found the courage to start soloing cause he's awesome at it. I think that Dime's passing had something to do with that definitely.

Why has the trend over the past few years been for many heavy bands to only play rhythm guitar with no solos?
Solos became viewed as outdated for a while, it seemed passé, and everything became riff oriented. I've always loved a good solo though.

I noticed Johhny K has produced all of your records.
Johnny K is home. We're the most comfortable with him. If it ain't broke don't fix it.

How do you want Disturbed to be remembered?
To be remembered as a great hard rock band. To stand the test of time. When people start talking about the great bands of all time that we're included somewhere in the conversation, a little bit of immortality.

BACK OF THE BOOK



01_06 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

A simple request, really...

It's the holidays again, which means it's time for me to share my modest wish list for the New Year. In no particular order, here's what I'm dreaming will happen in the magical world of video games in 2006:

A) Microsoft decrees they will no longer allow ports from the Xbox to the Xbox 360. All content will be built from the ground up for Xbox 360, and I will not be able to play any game even remotely similar on any other previous generation system.

B) Gamers go on strike, uniting against 60-dollar games for the next-generation of gaming. Microsoft takes the lead by deciding all Xbox 360 games must be priced under 50 dollars.

C) Games continue to fall in price, paving the way for a future where 30 dollars gets you most titles.

D) Games gradually get shorter and shorter, slowly weaning gamers away from the notion that a five-hour game is blasphemous. The intensity of the experience is more sustained, there's no protracted design to numb you at the half-way point, there's incentive to play the game again and again.

E) Designers don't dwell on inane cut-scenes that disarm the flow of gameplay. Stops for storytelling are quick, succinct and actually drive the game forward instead of trapping it in extraneous beats; the idea of editing becomes a part of game design.

F) I hone my Live skills to lay the smack down on those little boys who tell me "that's right bitch" in their pre-pubescent crackle upon kicking my ass in the games I thought I was actually good at. Where's Street Fighter when you need it?

G) I finally discover why Grand Theft Auto is so compelling and influential.

H) Capcom makes a sequel to Super Puzzle Fighter for Live Arcade, Nintendo finally releases another Mario 64-like Mario platformer, Sony decides to continue the God of War franchise, and the new Resident Evil is better than Resident Evil 4.

I) The industry bands together and decides to go one year without a single sequel.

J) Far fewer games are made. Companies put more money into more substantial projects, sales of individual titles increase while the selection is thinned and the quality grows.

K) No game is made in which the hero is in the military, is part of an elite force, or is in the military while leading an elite force.

L) Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath is rediscovered, makes millions, resurrects Oddworld Studios.

M) American developers learn how to make elegant human characters for the next-gen systems. While they're at it, they learn from the Japanese how to discern where to place the finer details, and where to make the keen sacrifices in modeling their worlds.

N) The ICO and Shadow of the Colossus team are knighted, given raises and fronted every resource needed to make their next game.

O) Gamemakers begin to grasp the potential power of their medium and start creating games that express emotion and personal visions. Games begin to gather increased respect, the industry evolves.

P) Microsoft manufactures a new round of Xbox 360s that don't sound like the jet liner I'm flying home on this Christmas.

Q) The PS3 and Revolution don't have cinder blocks for power supplies, and I can actually travel with them without straining my back.

R) Security stops asking me to show them my PSP and kids stop running up to me to stare at my PSP.

S) Sony decides to get serious about the PSP and deflects Nintendo's continued DS spanking. Battle mode is implemented online for Mario Kart DS. The DS is redesigned to look hipster cool, the PSP is tweaked to actually feel comfortable.

"Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath is rediscovered, makes millions, resurrects Oddworld Studios."

T) Someone makes an original game that sells millions of copies. Everyone decides they can be creative risk-takers again and new ideas become as common as sequels. Flights of fantasy still thrive in games.

U) E3 is canceled. Industry regroups and figures out how to create an effective trade show again. Booth babes unionize for E3's reintroduction in 2007, inspiring game designers to unionize as well. Wages increase, hours are better, projects are more efficient, more talent is attracted to the gamemaking world.

V) Xbox 360 games aren't so grossly shiny any more. Frame rates aren't broken. Excessive loading times are taken care of.

W) Nintendo and the Revolution don't attempt to compete with Sony or Microsoft with like-minded games. Nintendo creates simple, colorful, childlike experiences, and the Revolution controller continually forces developers to rethink the way they design.

X) Female characters receive breast reductions. Male characters are given a little vulnerability. A little character is written into our characters.

Y) Live Arcade takes off, developers rediscover the beauty of simplicity, a few bucks earns us enjoyable games that continue the retro revival. Companies discover that old users who have been around since the beginning are as important as worrying about new users. Somehow the rare 2D game is made again.

Z) Gaming continues to grow up, the industry learns how to skillfully navigate next-gen pitfalls, gamers and developers alike don't forget the wonder of imagination that makes games what they are.


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